

BRAND NEW FICTION

BOOKS

CINEMA

MANGA

VIDEOGAMES

ART

GRAPHIC NOVELS

INTERZONE

ISSUE ONE HUNDRED AND NINETY-SIX

JANUARY/FEBRUARY TWO THOUSAND AND FIVE

REMAKING THE WORLD WITH
CHINA MIÉVILLE

PAUL DI FILIPPO
NEAL BLAIKIE
DAVID IRA CLEARY
WILL McINTOSH
DAVID LANGFORD
MIKE O'DRISCOLL

SARAH ASH
INTERVIEWED

JASON STODDARD

WINNING MARS

GLITCH
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FINNEY
2004



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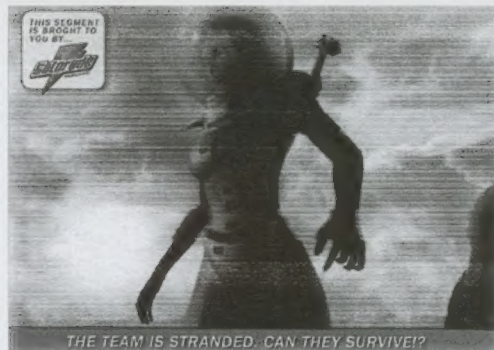
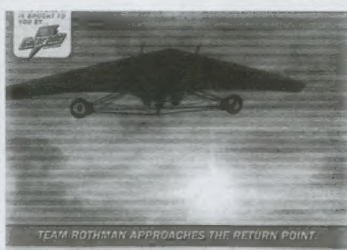
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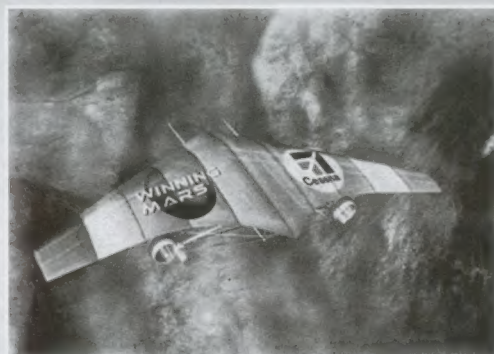
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BATTLESTAR GALACTICA

Battlestar Galactica: 'The less you like science fiction, the more you'll love this'

DAVID LANGFORD



ANSIBLE LINK

SF NEWS



s Others See Us. Howard Jacobson, who never tires of putting down fantasy, resorted to John Stuart Mill's mental health as another convenient springboard: 'In his dejection, Mill turns to poetry; not Virgil or Ovid, but the English Romantics, Wordsworth in particular, who he believed helped to re-educate him into common feelings. Wordsworth, notice, not Tolkien.' (*Independent Arts&Books Review*, 19 Nov) Likewise, many 19th-century folk who wished to be entertained by a newspaper columnist turned to Dickens, notice, not Howard Jacobson.

Iain Banks appeared at the Inverness Book Festival with Christopher Brookmyre: the awful truth emerged

when the interviewer, tongue-tied at some typical Culture name, asked Iain how it should be pronounced. Our man instantly admitted that he had no idea either. Brookmyre: 'I always suspected that!'

Thog's Macho Movie Moments. 'You're very pretty. For a girl.' (*Journey to the Center of Time*, 1967)

Ray Bradbury received the 2004 US National Medal of Arts, and Madeleine L'Engle the corresponding National Humanities Medal, in a White House Oval Office ceremony on 17 November. Eight people were honoured in each category. Bradbury accepted in person; L'Engle was represented by her granddaughter.

Publishers & Sinners. The Earthlight domain, not renewed by Simon & Schuster UK, now hosts an online ad/link farm exploiting past sf interest that could so easily have been redirected to S&S sf titles.

Robert Sawyer's 'Identity Theft' won the €6,000 prize in the Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya's annual contest for best unpublished sf novella in Catalan, Spanish, English, or French. Your columnist suspects he didn't write it in Catalan.

R.I.P. Pierre Berton (1920–2004), Canadian journalist, broadcaster and prolific novelist who wrote the children's fantasy *The Secret World of Og* (1961), died on 30 November aged 84.

• **Irwin Donenfeld**, editorial director and publisher of DC comics following the death of his father Harry (DC's founder) in 1965, died on 29 November; he was 78. • **Bob Haney**, US comics writer who wrote very many DC titles from the mid-1950s and was described as one of the Silver Age comics greats, died on 27 November. He was 78. • **Trina Scharf Hyman**, US artist and writer who illustrated over 150 books including many fantasies for children, died on 19 November aged 65. She had won the Caldecott Medal for children's authors and artists. • **Howard Keel** (1919–2004), US actor whose best-known genre appearance was in the film *The Day of the Triffids* (1963), died on 7 November. He was 85. • **Irv Novick** (1916–2004), US comics artist whose career began in 1940 and who drew *Batman* from the 1960s to the 1980s, died on 15 October. He was 88. • **Christopher Reeve** (1952–2004), US actor famous for his title role in four *Superman* films (1978–87), died from heart failure on 10 October, following systemic spread of infection from a pressure wound. He was 52. • **William J. 'Bill' Widder** (1926–2004), US fan since the 1930s, died in mid-October aged 78. His *Master Storyteller: An Illustrated Tour of the Fiction of L. Ron Hubbard* was shortlisted for a 2004 Hugo. • **Tetsu Yano** (1923–2004), long-time Japanese sf fan, author and translator, died on 13 October aged 81. His many translations included the works of Heinlein and Herbert.

Unique Selling Point. Ceefax TV *Choice* finds something positive to say about the new *Battlestar Galactica*: 'Take it on trust and watch anyway – *Galactica* is genuinely exceptional and the less you like science fiction, the more you'll love this new US drama.'

Martin Greenberg, sf anthologist extraordinaire, will surely be surprised to learn that he perished in a 1999 Egyptian plane crash and left a thirty-million-dollar bank account unclaimed in (apparently) the Czech Republic. So at any rate says this e-mail from BEN FARA, LAWYER BY PROFESSION AND PERSONAL ASSISTANCE TO LATE MR MARTIN GREENBERG, written all in capitals with a strong Nigerian accent...

Science Corner. Sighs of relief throughout the scientific world! According to

Nature, a worrying 2003 prediction – that the universe could spontaneously self-destruct in as little as 10 billion years – was recently revised to allow us a cheering 24 billion or so years. Good news for anyone who'd been carefully not starting any long books.

As Others See Us II. 'As for his readers, [Anthony] Powell can hardly be blamed for his plummy fans any more than, say, J.G. Ballard should be blamed for the flakiness of his, or Anne Tyler for the limpness of hers.' (Ian Sansom, *The London Review of Books*, 21 Oct)

George Lucas will, next June, become the 33rd person honoured for Lifetime Achievement by the American Film Institute.

Small Press. *Orbital*, the new British magazine about sf which was to launch in June 2004, remains on hold for good reason. Editor Steve Williams had a heart attack that summer and, although still intending to go ahead, has been under doctor's orders to avoid any work until his recovery is complete.



Ray Bradbury received the 2004 US National Medal of Arts, and Madeleine L'Engle the corresponding National Humanities Medal, in a White House Oval Office ceremony on 17 November

J.R.R. Tolkien placed third in the Forbes.com list of 'Top-Earning Dead Celebrities Of 2004', with posthumous earnings of \$23m. Ahead of him are Elvis Presley (\$40m) and Charles Schulz (\$35m); the roster of the stinking rich continues with John Lennon (\$21m), Dr Seuss (\$18m) and that icon of many an sf story, Marilyn Monroe (\$8m).

Jo Walton won the 2004 World Fantasy Award for best novel, with *Tooth and Claw*.

Plan 10 From Outer Space. Oh dear. Ed Wood's 'lost' porn film *Necromania* has been discovered, according to Reuters and similar lowlife sources. Oh dear. That is not dead which can eternal lie, And with strange aeons even fluffy Angora sweaters may die...

Thog's Masterclass. Sound Effects Dept: 'He made a face at me, soundlessly humming under his breath as if he was bored.' (Laurell K. Hamilton, *The Killing Dance*, 1997) • **Dept of Slannish Tendrils:** 'He turned to the strikingly beautiful girl sitting beside him.

A girl whose long almost blue-black hair seemed so vibrantly alive that it pulsed with a sentience of its own.' (Bron Fane, 'Jungle of Death', *Supernatural Stories* #27, 1959) • **Alien Planetology Dept:** 'A tall fountain of spray reached skyward, high enough that its top was touched red by the light of the sun rising in the west.' (S.M. Stirling and David Drake, *The Sword*, 1995) • **Dept of Stupefying Similes:** 'The boiling upsurge of questions and ideas whirled around in Harding's head like particles being accelerated in a cyclotron, until he felt like a man both blind and deaf searching for a needle in a lightless, soundless chamber, and forced to wear feather pillows for gloves.' (Steve Hall, 'Out of Character', *Science Fantasy* 57, Feb 1963)



JASON STODDARD WINNING



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CAN

SIMULATIONS AND LIVE FEED BY JOSH FINNEY OF GLITCHWERK

MARS

DEATH

Death came as nothing more than a thin white line in the light blue Martian sky. Like a single strand of spider-silk, gossamer and insubstantial. There was no sound.

Nandir's team, Glenn Rothman thought, stopping for a moment to watch. Chatter from the Can above: Unstable. Tumbled. Nobody knew why.

Glenn shivered. He'd almost picked Nandir's route, which seemed easier on the rolling and flying legs but more difficult on the Overland Challenge to the travel pod. Perfect for him and –

"Come on!" Alena said, over the local comm. She was standing thirty feet in front of him, looking back, her face twisted into an angry mask.

"We just lost Nandir."

"I'm going to lose *you* if you don't get moving!"

"Don't you care?"

An inarticulate growl. Then a sigh. They were, after all, all camera, all the time. "Of course I care. But I want to win."

Glenn shook his head. He bounced over to her and tried to take her hand, but she pulled away. "Not now!" she said. Her normally full lips were compressed into a thin line, the soft arcs of her face pulled into something harder and more brutal. The face he used to love. The face he still loved.

She bounded away and he hurried to catch up. She'd made it clear that they were only back together for this one ultimate challenge, bigger than Everest, bigger than freeclimbing Half-Dome, bigger than marathoning the Utah desert, bigger than swimming the English Channel, bigger than their four-year marriage, bigger than anything he could give.

He caught up and tried to give her a smile. She looked ahead

grimly. The terrain was getting more rugged. Ahead of them rose part of Ius Chasma, a two-thousand-foot near-vertical wall they would have to freeclimb to reach their transpo pod.

The low gravity was both a blessing and a curse. Glenn was still getting used to what he could do. The squeezesuit and header made him top-heavy, throwing off his balance, but his total weight here was still less than half of what he was used to.

"More human interest, Glenn," the Can blatted at him from his private channel.

He shook his head. They'd been ordering them around since before they left earth.

"Glenn, we need to see Alena."

He plodded ahead.

"Glenn, we're close to contract breach."

He turned to focus on Alena. The squeezesuit clung to her curves, and the transparent header was designed to show as much of her pretty face as possible. Less attractive now, perhaps, with her hair hanging damp and her mouth set in a hard line.

"More," they said.

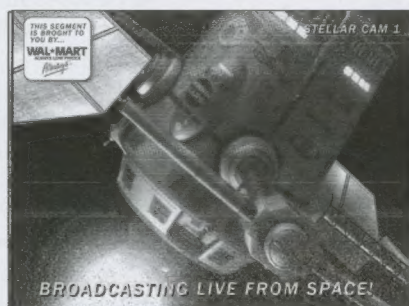
Glenn tried running in front of her and feeding the view from one of his rear cameras, but it was too hard to concentrate on the terrain ahead and keep her in frame. Eventually he dropped back to focus on the exaggerated hourglass shape of her suit.

"Good," they said. "Stay there for a while."

"Okay," he said. *Idiots.*

PITCH

"Of course someone is going to die. Probably lots of someones."



Jere Gutierrez nodded solemnly. So maybe the old fuck wasn't just another crank with a stupid dream trying to suck his nuts.

"Death is a legal problem," he said.

"For Neteno?"

Jere didn't answer. He pressed a discreet button and the datanet whispered in his ear. His guest was Evan McMaster, producer of *Endurance*, one of the last reality shows.

So he was real. He was part of the Golden Age.

Jere never prescreened CVs because everyone claimed some kind of connection, whether it was the last great years of Reality, or the almost-mythical Hegemony of the 70s and 80s, when the world was run by television, when audiences sat rapt on their cheap cloth sofas and scarfed microwave dinners in front of the tube, long before the coming of the internet and the rise of Interactives, long before television had been cast into the 'Linear, Free-Access' ghetto. Every diapered octogenarian who tottered into his office, smelling of piss and death, claimed to be part of that great time. They all claimed to know that one compelling idea that would trounce all and return Neteno to some crowning glory, like television of old.

So maybe taking this meeting was not just a complete padre-suckup. Maybe dad was right, just this once.

"Neteno doesn't do snuff," Jere said.

"What about the new Afghanistan thing? Or the Philippines?"

"That was news."

"What about the Twelve Days in May?"

Jere just looked at him. He waited for the old guy to drop his eyes. And kept waiting.

"Make your pitch," Jere said. "And make it good."

Evan stood up and paced in front of Jere's obsidian desk, backlit by the dim light coming in from the tinted window that overlooked Los Angeles.

"First, let's dispense with the death thing," he said. "Sponsors don't like it."

"Don't lie. Sponsors love it. They just look properly horrified and give some insignificant percentage of their profits to the survivors and everyone's happy. Your big problem is legal."

"Tell me why we should take the chance."

Evan went back to his pocket projector and remapped the far wall with demographics, charts, multicolored peaks spiking like some impossible landscape. Stuff he had seen before, but this was far out of proportion. And yet it still bore the stamp of 411, Inc. It was good data.

"Three reasons. First, the Chinese."

"The Chinese stopped at the moon."

"Yeah. They said they'd go to Mars, but they're bogged down at the Moon."

"Cost."

"Yeah. Another is NASA. They're dead. Gutted. After the Twelve Days in May, all the money is going to Homeland Security. Everything's being folded into the new Oversight thing. And the polls show people being OK with the Kevorking of the Mars flights. But underneath it all is a pent-up need to see some great endeavor. It's the Frontier Factor."

"Never heard of it."

"Henry Kase. New pundit. Blames the lack of a Frontier Factor for most of the world's problems. Complete crap, maybe, but it maps well on the audience we're looking at."

"Go on."

"Third, the Rabid Fan. That's real. You know it."

Jere nodded. Everyone dreamed of creating a new *Star Trek*, still in syndication after all these years, or a new *Simpsons*, a new show that made people dress up, go to conventions, meet in real life, found languages, change dictionaries.

"They'll think this is too game-show," Jere said.

"Yeah. But they'll watch. All the trekkies and scifi nuts and people who dream about getting out, getting away, people who hate their lives for whatever reason, they'll all watch. Look at the numbers."

Jere looked at the projection, peaky and perfect and tantalizing. If they could create something like that . . . he sat silent for a long time, imagining himself at the forefront of a movement.

"There are problems," Jere said finally.

"Of course."

"Death is still one. I can borrow a platoon of lawyers to armor-plate our ass, but the shitstorm that follows may still take us down. Especially if they all kick it. As in Neteno is a goner. Done. Stick a fork in it."

Evan nodded. "I know."

"You're asking me to risk my network? While you sit there, almighty, living off interest from a previous life?"

"I'm prepared to throw in," Evan said.

"How much?"

"Everything."

"It's never everything."

Evan sighed. "I'll sign a personal guarantee."

Jere had the bottom line whispered back to him and whistled.

"You need funding like a first-run 'Active for a free-access 'Near.'"

"The sponsors will line up."

"Why?"

"Their logo. On Mars. Maybe a featurette. Come on!"

"Sponsors don't like one-shots."

"So tell them this is a series. Tell them we're going to storm the Chinese on the moon!"

It was crazy. It was stupid. And it was, more than likely, impossible. But it was an idea. It was a big idea. And it just might be enough.

"Reality shows are dead," Jere said.

"It's coal. Time to mine it."

Jere nodded. The way things retroed round and round so fast, it was probably comfortably new again. And there were probably millions of people like himself who had caught a glimpse of the last reality shows and remembered them in a fond way.

You've taken big chances, he thought. Which is why Neteno is a rising star amongst dying losers.

"We may be able to get some money from NASA," Jere said, finally. *And some money from Dad, since he recommended Evan.*

"You're in?" Evan said.

"How long's the flight?"

"To Mars? Three months. We're going to do it?"

"Then we can definitely get food and bev sponsors. Perfect, too, start on the holidays when everyone's home and be ready for sweeps in Feb."

"We're doing it?"

Jere nodded.

Evan did a little jump and victory dance.

Jere cleared his calendar with a few quick touches and stood up. "Let's go to lunch. I need to know how you intend to pull this stunt."

Evan's eyes sparkled. "It's Russian tech. You know, the stuff they do the \$250k packages to orbit for a week."

Jere paused at the door. "That's why I know people will die."

CRASH

"Pull it out! Come on! Pull!" Sam Ruiz shouted through their local comm. Mike Kinsson and Juelie Peters tugged at the

shattered plastic shell. Suddenly the whole side twisted off, and all three ended up in a tangled heap on the dusty ground. Mike Kinsson noticed absently that the Disney and Red Bull and Wal-Mart logos on Juelie's suit were covered in dust, and reached out to brush them off.

"What are you doing?" Sam said, yanking Juelie to her feet.

"Dust . . ." Mike said, and trailed off. It was stupid anyway. Why should he worry about their sponsors? Why should he worry about anything? They were dead.

Sam's team had been given the easiest Overland Challenge, nothing more than a fast run over rocky ground, because they had been assigned the toughest rolling and flying part. Soaring over a tiny edge of Valles Marineris was part of their air journey, partly to make it more dramatic and partly to bring back some great images.

But after their brief Overland, they'd bounced up to the scene of a disaster. Their transpo pod had smashed on a huge boulder. Its smooth shape was now twisted into something that more resembled a crushed basketball.

It was supposed to hit and roll, Mike thought. A terrible design, something from last-century NASA that didn't work then, even with all the redundancy the government could throw at it. Now the Wheel and Kite inside were probably . . .

"Junk," he said softly, as Sam and Juelie began pulling out bundles of bent and sheared struts and shreds of fabric.

"Are you going to help?" Juelie asked.

Like a robot, Mike went and helped them pull out the contents of the pod. He noticed that the big Timberland and Kia and Cessna logos emblazoned on the outside of the pod had survived intact, and he had to suppress the urge to laugh. Some of the last pieces had been wedged into the rock and wouldn't come out – including the engine that powered the Wheel and Kite.

"Where's the rest of it?" Sam yelled.

"Stuck."

Sam glared at him and crawled inside. When Sam crawled out again, sweat was running down his cheeks and there was a strange, faraway look in his eyes. Mike looked around at the twisted pieces strewn around them and shook his head. Sam saw it and grabbed him.

"What?" he said. "What are you shaking your head for?"

"We're dead," Mike said. "It's over."

"No! We can make something! We can do some hybrid thing, like a wheel," he began rooting through the wreckage, frantic.

"Powered by what?" Mike said softly.

"We can power it! Or we can make skis! Or we can . . ."

Juelie went over to Sam and laid a hand on his shoulder. As soon as he felt her touch, he stopped. He stayed still on his hands and knees, looking down at the rocks and dust, panting.

"Mike's right," Juelie said. "I saw the engine."

Sam stood up. The pale sun reflected off his shiny bronze face. He looked from the wreckage to the horizon and back again. "I don't want to give up!" he said.

"Why?" Juelie said. "We can't win."

Sam looked at her for long moments, as if trying to decipher a strange phrase in an unknown language. Then he slumped. All the tension left him. He sat on a boulder and hugged his knees. Something like a wail escaped him. Under the cloudless alien sky, amidst a red desert unrelieved by water or leaf or lichen, it was a chilling sound.

"What do we do?" he said finally. "How do we get to the Returns?"

"We don't," Mike said, standing carefully away.

Sam just looked up at him.

"Walk overland," Juelie said. "It doesn't matter how long it takes."

"There's not enough food and water," Mike said.

"We'll eat less!"

"We can't cross the Valles Marineris."

"Why not?"

"Mile-high vertical walls."

Juelie was silent for a while. "They'll have to come rescue us," she said finally.

"No," Mike said.

"We've lost," Sam said.

"Wait," Juelie said. "What do you mean, 'no'?"

"They can't just come down and get us," Mike told her. "Other than our drops and the return modules, there's no way to get down here and back again."

Juelie looked confused.

"They can't rescue us," Mike said. "They don't have the capability."

"Then what do we do?" Sam said. "Sit here and die?"

Mike looked away. Even he knew better than to answer that. Juelie walked over and offered Sam her hand. After a moment, he took it, head hanging low. Mike edged away from the two, not wanting to be part of any coming outburst. Sam had been driven by a single purpose since the start: to win his share of the thirty million dollars. That's what he wanted. Nothing more, nothing less. He hadn't disguised it, hadn't hid it. But now that was taken away. And more.

We knew the risks when we signed, Mike thought, walking further away. *Or at least I did. I don't know if Sam and Juelie were smart enough to really read through the eighty-page contract. It made them into a grey undefined thing that the legal system could wrangle about for years if the deaths and lawsuits came.*

But I didn't care. All I ever wanted to do was to see another planet. Earth was a dead-end. People pursuing dead-end dreams, interested in nothing more than making money and amusing themselves. Nobody explored. Nobody took chances.

Except for my dreams, I was as bad as everyone else. Too scared to give up my job, to let go of my condo, my 'Actives, my things. Endlessly yearning, but no ability to commit.

And so, this great leap. Finally.

And so, now you die.

Mike tried to make himself feel something, but he couldn't. It was too far away, too remote. They had maybe five days worth of food and water in their packs. Five days, and then a couple of days for the recycling to stop working, or some other suit malfunction.

It's too bad they didn't give the science pack to me, Mike thought. *I would have infinite time to do the experiments. Or at least many days. But it had gone to the other geek on the Thorens team.*

He had wandered a hundred feet or so away from the couple when the voice from the Can blatted in his ear.

"We're aware of your situation," they said.

"So?" he heard Sam ask.

"We're asking the Paul team to divert and rescue," they said. "We think he can carry you in his Wheel. Is your fuel bladder undamaged?"

"Yes!" Juelie said, hope rising in her voice.

"Good. We're transmitting the request to him now."

"Great!" Juelie said. Sam's head still hung, though. "Sam, did you hear that? We're going to be rescued."

"It's a request," Sam said. "Re-request. Do you think Paul is going to give up his thirty million?"

"Thirty?" she asked

"Yeah. He's the single guy. The nut."

Mike could see Juelie looking up at him for a moment, then down at Sam.

"He might," she said. "He still might."

Sam's laughter echoed in the dying Martian day.

LIES

"Promise them more flights," Evan McMaster said.

"We don't have any," Jere Gutierrez said. The Russians had looked at their plans, conferred gravely, and named a price that was ten times what their highest projections were. Now they were back in their shabby Moscow hotel, drinking Stolichnaya in a decaying bar that looked like it was last decorated back in the 90s.

"They're bluffing," Evan said.

"What do you mean?"

"They do tourist crap. You don't think they really know how to put together a Mars mission? They never even landed a man on the moon!"

"Yes they did. . . ."

"What do they teach you with in school these days? A VCR and a chocolate cake? No Commies on the moon. Just us. 1969."

"The Russians did it too!" Jere said.

"Nope. Never. Once we did it, they dropped their program and did unmanned probes. Said that sending people was a showboating capitalist move."

"Shit, man, don't scare me."

"You just need to know what we're dealing with," Evan said.

"It's a poker game. And they're bluffing."

"If you don't think they can get to Mars, why are we here?"

"I think they can make it to Mars. But it won't be easy. It'll be hard. And they know it."

"So what do we do?" Jere said.

"Bluff right back. Tell them we're going to do this every year. Every three months. Every shittin' week if that's what it takes."

"You're going to lie to the Russian mafia?"

Evan smiled. "No. You are."

"No," Jere said, shivering, remembering too many stories from dad, the first days of the internet, the way some companies got financed.

"I thought Neteno was the big maverick studio, willing to take any chance."

"We are."

"Then act like it, or I'll take it to Fox."

Jere opened his mouth. Closed it. The rumor had already been spilled. Every network knew about it. And they would probably be interested, if they saw Evan's data.

Evan had him by the nuts.

"How do I do this?" Jere asked. "And live?"

"They're gonna have their setbacks, too, stuff we can put them over a barrel for. Once we've primed the audience, they have to meet our schedule. Or all the advertising for RusSpace goes out the door."

And you think you'll draw them into your web too, Jere thought.

"I wish I had your confidence."

"It's my life, too," Evan said.

Yes, Jere thought. *And you're more visible than I am. I will make sure it is your life. First, you fuck. First.*

"Okay," he said. "We bluff. Now, what's this the lawyers have come up with for the contract?"

"Aha," Evan said. He pulled out a Palm and scrolled through a long document. "Eighty pages of gibberish. They want real

signatures in real pen."

"What does it say?"

"You don't want to know," Evan said, eyes still on the screen.

"Give me the gist."

"Has them renounce their US citizenship, become wards of Neteno, hold us harmless, things like that. If they make it back, they may have to live at airports."

"There are always volunteers."

"The lawyers had one other suggestion."

"What's that?"

"Start in the prisons. If they die, public reaction will be less."

"But they'll have less buy-in," Evan said, frowning.

"Yeah, that's a problem. Do you think we can spin it?"

"I'd be happier if most of them were just genpop."

"Maybe a mix," Evan said.

Jere nodded and sipped his drink. There was silence for a time. The sound of an argument deep in the hotel, maybe from the kitchen. Jere let the silence stretch out.

"Why?" Jere said, finally.

"Why what?"

"Why are you doing this? Just the money?"

Evan sighed and looked away, to the cute blonde bartender. For a while, Jere thought he wouldn't answer.

Then Evan looked down at the table and said, "After a while, you get used to it. Not the money. The other shit. Having dinner with George Bush, 'cause you have your hand on the throat of the public. Fucking Mary-Kate Olsen, since you pay more attention to her at one premiere than her husband does all month. Picking up your office phone and asking for anything and getting it, 'cause you're on top, you're on fire. Why else?"

Because you don't want your dad to look at you, with that look, that are-you-fucking-stupid look, ever again, Jere thought.

But he just nodded, and they went back to serious drinking. Later, there would be women. Later still would be more negotiation. Endless rounds. Bluff and dare. The real product of Hollywood.

OFFER

The only thing that kept Keith Paul from swatting the tiny cam that dangled in front of him was that he knew that would lose him the thirty million dollars. *Contract breach*, the asswipe PA would say, in that breathy feminine voice of his. All camera, all the time. We can tap in whenever we want.

Yeah, and I hope you get a shot of me taking a great huge shit, Keith thought. Broadcast that to your eight hundred million viewers. Here is Keith Paul, taking a dump on your ratings.

He would be sure to say that when he won. When they pointed the camera at his face, he would tell them exactly what he thought of them. His crowning words, his first major televised fuck-you-all.

And he would win. No doubt about that. Teams were for pussies. He'd been able to skin the Wheel and string the Kite faster than any team back when they were training. He didn't have arguments with himself, or forget where something went.

No, everything was great. He allowed himself to look up at the light blue sky. Really not that different from Earth. There was only one creepy thing. Nothing moved. It felt old and ancient and unnatural, and the sun looked small and dim. He kept wiping at his header's visor to clear it, but it wasn't cloudy or tinted. That was just the way Mars looked. Because it was farther away from the sun.

"We need to make a request," said the voice of the Can. Not the breathy one, but the cute little girl that the breathy

asshole was sleeping with.

"What?" They always had requests. *Look at this, do that, scratch your ass.*

"The Ruiz team's transpo pod had a landing, um, malfunction. They have no transport."

"So?" Tough shit.

"We'd like you to divert your Wheel and collect them."

"I haven't even reached my transpo yet."

"After you get there."

"And you're going to give me extra time for this?"

A pause. "No."

"Then how the hell am I supposed to win?"

Another pause. "They'll die if you don't pick them up."

"So?"

Finally, a new voice, deep and resonant. Frank Sellers, that John Glenn fuck that had rode them out here.

"Keith, we'd really like you to consider this. Even if you don't win the prize money – and you still might – the act of rescue will create its own reward."

"Like, they'll pay me more than thirty million bucks for it?"

"I'm sure our sponsors will be very generous."

"More than thirty million generous?"

Another pause. For a while, Keith thought they'd given up on him. But Frank started in as he caught the first glimpse of his transpo pod, glittering in the distance.

"Keith, we've got buy-in from several of the sponsors. We can get you a million. Plus other things. Cars . . ."

"No."

"They'll die. That will be on your conscience."

"They can't prosecute me for it." It would be just like them, to dredge up the fact that he was the only former felon, even though he was pardoned, even though it was just a simple carjacking thing, nothing much.

Long pause. "No."

"I think I'll ignore you now."

"Keith . . ."

Keith looked up at the thin sky, as if to try and see the Can spinning overhead. "A million is not thirty. A million and promises is not thirty. Sorry, no can do."

"You may not win."

"I will."

Another pause. This one longer. "We can go two million."

"Did you fail math? Two million is not greater than thirty. Give me an offer more than thirty, and they're saved."

"We . . . probably can't do that."

"I . . . probably can't save them," Keith said, mocking his tone.

Silence. Blissful silence. Long yards passed and the transpo pod swelled in his view. As he reached its smooth, unmarred surface, Frank's voice crackled to life again. "Even if you win," he said. "People will hate you."

"That's all right," Keith said. "I love myself enough for all of them."

SCIENCE

"I thought they found life on Mars," Jere said.

Evan rolled his eyes heavenward. It was 4:11AM, and they were screaming down the 5 at triple-digit speeds in Jere's Porsche. The scrub-brush at the side of the road whipped by, ghostly gray streamers disappearing into taillight-red twilight. They were in that no-man's-land between Stockton and Santa Clarita where the land falls away and you could believe you were the only person in California, at least for a time.

Jere frowned, seeing the look out of the corner of his eye. "What? They didn't? Talk, you fucking know-it-all."

"They still don't know. They're still arguing about it."

"Funny thinking of Mars as a science thing."

Evan shook his head, and then said, "It's too bad we can't do it this year. Do the whole fortieth-anniversary shindig."

"Fortieth anniversary of what?"

"Viking. 1976."

We put shit on Mars way back then? Jere thought. "We're still on for '18?"

"So far."

Silence for a long time. In front of them there was nothing but darkness and stars and the dim outline of mountains. Jere pushed the car to 120, 130, 140. The blur became a haze of motion, almost surreal.

"So what do you think about Berkeley?" Jere said.

"It's crap."

"Why?"

"Like, duh. Berkeley probably can't even design the right experiments package. They're a liberal arts school."

"So we get another school."

"No."

"What?"

"Industry," Evan said. "That's where the money really is. We go to industry."

"Who?"

"Siemens. Or IBM. Someone big, with deep pockets."

Jere nodded. Berkeley had offered them quite a bit of money. With IBM in on a bidding war, how high could the stakes get? This idea was looking better and better all the time.

EXPERIMENTS

Being paired with two beautiful women was, well, distracting, Geoff Smith thought. Their squeezesuits left almost nothing to the imagination, and every time he looked up, his thoughts were shattered by the simple beauty of the feminine form.

And what thoughts they were! Here he was, Geoff Smith, on an alien planet! And he was going to prove there was life on it! He would do what a million scientists back on Earth wanted to do! Him, with nothing more than a bachelor's degree in chemistry, would do what all the Ph.Ds told him he couldn't do. He would put Martian life under a microscope for the first time! He would look at it with his own eyes! He would be famous!

Because the big problem was that nobody had ever really looked. They'd tried the Carbon-14 tagging trick on Viking, they'd tried spectrographic analysis, but they'd never just taken a sample of dirt, put it on a microscope slide, and looked at it.

"Damn!" Wende Kirkshoff said. She was hanging from the top curve of their Wheel, holding a strut and looking at it disgustedly. She was a pretty blonde girl with freckles and a pleasant demeanor, but Geoff always thought she was avoiding him.

"What's the matter?" Laci Thorens said. She was on the ground, assembling the engine into a subframe with a grim intensity.

"This strut doesn't have the little fitting on the end," Wende said. "It won't stay in."

"Aren't there spares?"

"Uh, no, I don't think so."

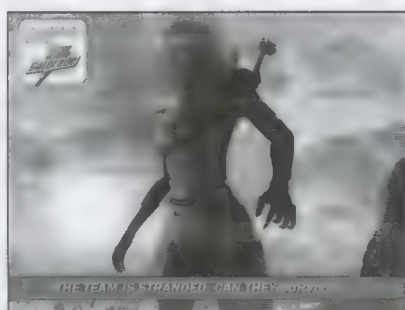
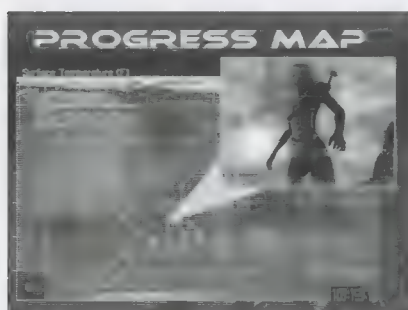
Geoff shook his head and bent back to his work. *Who cared about the prize? With his discovery, he would be so famous that he could name his price.*



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KITE





He'd set the IBM box in the lee of the transpo pod like the instructions said, digging down like they told him. He was supposed to let it go for a half-hour, then take the whole thing with them.

Which was stupid. IBM was doing the same old thing. When all they had to do, really, was give him a bag and a microscope.

So he'd brought his own. Now it was just a matter of getting some dirt, throwing some water on it, putting it on the slide, and looking for wriggles.

"There aren't any spares," Wende said.

"Shit. Let me see." Laci hopped up to the top of the Wheel.

He fumbled the little vial of water out of the tiny pocket of his squeezesuit. The microscope was already out, sitting perched on top of a medium-sized rock, away from the dust and grit.

How had Viking done it? It had moved a rock, hadn't it? And this new one from IBM was digging down. Probably best to just combine both techniques, Geoff thought, and shoved a medium-sized boulder out of the way.

He dug down into the dust with his fingers, feeling the chill seep through his squeezesuit. At about six inches down, he struck another rock and decided that was enough. The dust was clinging to his transparent header, and the front half of his suit was pink.

He took a pinch of dust from the shallow hole and dropped it onto a glass slide. The water had gone frosty around the top. He dropped a couple of drops on the slide and they froze almost instantly, making something that looked like red ice cream.

Damn, I didn't think of that. There was no way he was going to see something through all that gunk with the microscope.

He sloshed some more water on it and pushed it around with the tip of his finger, trying to get the mixture thin enough to see through. After a couple of tries, he managed to get a thin pink film that looked reasonably transparent.

"Geoff!" Laci said. "We need your help!"

"Can't," he said. "In the middle of an experiment."

"We need your help or we ain't rolling anywhere!"

Geoff slid the slide into the microscope and looked at the watch embedded in his suit. "We have time." And in fact, they did have almost twenty minutes left.

"We have to do it now!" Wende said.

"Wait a minute," Geoff said. Slide in place. Microscope to eye. Nothing but fuzzy grey darkness. Focus. Dark, dark. Sliding into focus. Becoming great boulders.

"Geoff, now!" Laci said.

"Just a few seconds," Geoff said. "Then you can have me." Focus. Ah. Crystal-clear. Scan it over a bit and find a brighter area. There. Ah.

Water crystals. Boulders. Bright light. Nothing else.

Well, of course it wouldn't move. But where was the rounded wall of a bacterium, or the jelly of an amoeba?

"Now," Laci said, and strong hands picked him up. He felt his grip on the microscope slipping. He grabbed it tighter, and it popped from his hands. He was jerked back as he watched it fall, with agonizing slowness, into the dust and grit.

He wrenched out of Laci's grip and scooped up the microscope. It was dusty, but looked okay. He looked through it. The slide was out of position, but he could still see. He reached for the focus knob . . .

The microscope was torn out of his hands. He looked up to see Laci standing in front of him, holding the microscope behind her back.

"Give it back!" he said. "This is important. I'm right . . ."

She punched his header. Hard. He could see the soft transparent plastic actually conform to her fist. It didn't quite touch him, but the kinetic energy of the blow knocked him to the ground.

"Go," she said. "Help Wende. You'll get your toy back when you're done."

"Give it back!"

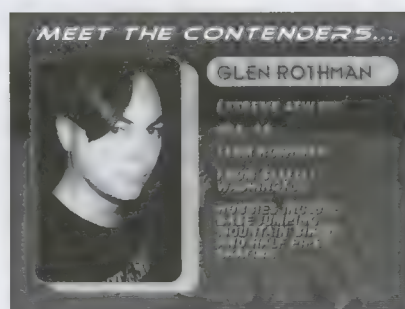
Laci raised the instrument and made as if to smash it on a boulder. Geoff lunged forward at her, but she danced away.

"No," she said. "Go help. I'll give it back later."

"Laci, this is important!"

"Yeah, and so is surviving. Go help."

Geoff knew when he was beaten. He sighed and joined Wende atop the Wheel, where they quickly discovered another problem: the epoxy they'd provided for quick repairs wasn't setting in the Martian cold.



"What do we do now?" Wende asked.

Geoff stopped looking longingly at the microscope – now sitting on top of their hydrazine engine – and inspected the problem. The strut was one of the main load-bearers that held them suspended under the top of the Wheel.

"What about the Kite?" Geoff said. "Doesn't it share components with this? Maybe it has a strut with the right connector on it."

"What about when we have to fly?"

"We make sure we don't forget the damn thing."

They dug into the bundle of struts and fabric. The components were the same, and many of them were the same length. When Geoff found one with the right connector on the end, he pulled it out and handed it to Wende.

"Just like Ikea," he said.

"They aren't the sponsor!"

"Same idea."

Then he noticed that Laci was frantically tightening the straps that held the little engine in place. "We're late!" she said. "Check the time! Come on come on come on! Let's go!"

Laci started the engine. Near the Wheel, his microscope was still parked on top of a rock.

"Wait!" he said, running to get it.

The Wheel was already moving. "Hurry up!" Laci said.

He grabbed the microscope and ran back, throwing himself up the scaffold towards the perch by the cabin. The landscape sped by. The soft rim of the Wheel bounced over rocks and boulders.

But he had his microscope. Between that and the IBM package, he would surely find something. He would still be famous.

The IBM package!

Oh, shit, no! No no no!

He'd never picked it up.

"Stop!" he cried. "You have to go back! I left the IBM package."

Laci gave him a disgusted look. "How could you be that stupid?"

"Go back."

She just looked at him. A slow smile spread on her face. "Sorry," she said.

Geoff looked back at the remains of their transpo pod, but it had already disappeared over a hill. They were moving. And he was lost.

SPONSORS

"It seems like a lot of work for just a show," said the shithead from P&G. He was looking at the model of the Can, sprouting its ring and eleven pods.

God save me from executives who think they're smart, Jere thought. *Send them to the golf course and the cocktail lounge, where the conversational bar is comfortably low.*

They were in the Neteno boardroom, which had been transformed into a neomodern interpretation of a 70s NASA workroom, redone on a much greater scale and budget. A movingink banner was cycling through imagined Marsscapes and the logo for Neteno's Winning Mars, and models of the Can, the drop and transpo pods, the Kites and the Wheels and the Returns hung from the ceiling or were suspended with cheap magnetic trickery.

But there were a lot more people than the P&G guy in today. There was Altria, and J&J, and Foodlink, and a whole bunch of other guys who wanted to have product placed on the show.

So he was playing to an audience when he answered:

"Not really," he said. He pointed at the ring. "Take the ring.

It's a standard component of the new RusSpace orbital hotels. And we're saving four module drops by incorporating all the Return pods into a single big softlander. The Transpo pods are as simple and reliable as they get, just a big bouncing ball. We're actually using a lot of proven technology for this, just in new ways."

"Probably what they said about the Titanic," P&G shithead said, grinning at the other execs. "Once you drop them on the surface, you have a road course, or something like that?"

"Five courses," Jere said, changing the graphics on the movingink banner. "All of them have three phases of travel: on foot, rolling on a Wheel, and flying in a Kite. We've picked routes that will highlight some spectacular scenery, like parts of the Valles Marineris . . ."

"What?"

"Think Grand Canyon. Times ten."

"Oh."

"And we have a vertical climb of 2000 feet set for one group. We're hoping to get some extreme-sports aficionados in the audience."

"Is that safe?" the P&G guy asked.

"We don't claim infallibility." *And you're not complaining,* Jere thought. *Don't think we don't notice that.*

"Who's signed so far?" shithead asked.

"That's confidential. If you want to buy a prospectus package, we'll discuss that further." *And you aren't saying anything about that, either, are you? Because you know this is the deal of the century.*

"What you don't see is the most important part," Jere said.

"The people who will actually make this happen."

"You already have your teams picked?"

"No. I just want to show you what the teams might look like. Because I know you have this idea of a bunch of spacesuit-clad guys hopping around on a dead planet. Boring, right? Well, no."

At that moment, Evan McMaster entered the boardroom through the double doors at the back, accompanied by a trio of young women wearing cosmetic squeezesuits and headers. The suits hugged every one of their curves, making them seem impossibly perfect, unattainable, unreal.

There was a collective gasp from the execs, and Jere smiled. It always worked that way.

"I don't see how it will work." Not the asswipe. Another one. This one from Altria.

"Mars does have a thin atmosphere," Evan said. "We can provide pressurized air through a small backpack only to the face. The pressure required to maintain body integrity is provided by the squeezesuit."

"Showboating," muttered the original P&G geek.

"Which would you rather look at – this, or some old Russian cosmonaut in a wrinkled-up body sock?"

"Your contestants may not look that good."

Evan smiled. "The squeezesuit is of variable thickness. We can make a wide variety of body types look good. And it provides an excellent palette for logo placement."

He snapped his fingers, and logos appeared at strategic spots on the suits. Spots with high visual magnetism, to use the geek phrase. One of the girls spun to reveal a P&G competitor's logo emblazoned over her buttocks.

Oh, they loved it. Jere could see it in their eyes. They were sold. They would talk tough and haggle, but they had them. Just like Panasonic and Canon and Nikon fighting over the imaging rights, Sony and Nokia and Motorola fighting over the comms deal, Red Bull and Gatorade fighting over the energy

drink part of it, hell, damn near every single nut and bolt was being fought over.

Go ahead, Jere thought. Talk. Then shut up and give us your fucking money.

ASCENT

They were halfway up the sheer face, and the way Alena was climbing, they were going to die. Glenn watched her almost literally fly up the rock, making twenty-foot jumps from handhold to handhold, reaching out and grasping the smallest outcropping and crevice with fluid grace and deceptive ease.

Dangerous ease, he thought. Climbing in the low gravity seemed childishly simple compared to climbing on Earth. Which meant it was easy to take one too many chances.

Alena made one last lunge and scrabbled for grip in a tiny crevice. Her feet skidded and she slid down the face for one terrible instant before catching on another tiny outcropping. Tiny pebbles and sand bounced off Glenn's visor.

"Slow down!" he said.

"We need to keep moving!"

"Alena . . ."

Labored breathing over the comm. "Listen to them!" Alena said. "Laci's team is already rolling, and that psycho guy is, too!"

Glenn cursed. The voices from the Can, when they weren't giving orders, provided a blow-by-blow of what the other teams were doing. To get you doing something stupid.

Glenn pulled himself up nearer to Alena. She resumed climbing, too.

"Let me get nearer," he said. "So we can safety each other."

"We have to keep going."

"The others have more time to roll. We aren't falling behind."

Alena stopped for a moment. "I know, but . . ."

"It's hard not to think it, yeah." Glenn finished for her. He pulled himself even higher. She stayed in place for once.

"We'll make the top before nightfall," he said. "Then we shelter and wait it out. We've got a short roll and a reasonable flight. We still have the best chance of winning, Alena."

Pant, pant. He was close enough to be her failsafe now.

Alena looked back, gave him a thin smile, and pulled herself up again. For a while it was all by the book, then Alena began stretching it a bit, leaping a bit too far, aiming at crevices just a bit too small. With the sun below the cliff, the shadows were deep, purple-black, and the cliff was losing definition in the dying day.

When they reached a deep crevice in the rock, Glenn thought things had begun to get better. But the rock was fragile and crumbly, and rust-red chunks came off easily in his hands. Glenn was about to tell Alena that they should get out of there when she reached up and grabbed an outcropping that broke off in her hand.

From ten feet above Glenn, she began to fall, agonizingly slow. Glenn felt his heart thundering in his chest, and had a momentary vision of the two of them tumbling out of the crevice to fall thousands of feet to the rocks below. He tested his handholds and footholds, and a small cry escaped his lips when he realized they probably wouldn't survive the impact of Alena.

Glenn jumped downward, seeking better purchase. Slip and slide. Nothing more. Down once again. Nope.

Down again, and then Alena piled into him, an amazingly strong shock in the weak gravity. *Mass still works*, Glenn

thought, wildly, a moment after he'd lost all contact with the cliff face.

Alena flailed, trying to catch the rock surface as it skidded by. Glenn knew that soon they would be moving too fast to stop, and reached frantically himself. He slowed their fall, but didn't stop it.

Where was the edge of the crevice?

He looked below him. Right here. But there was one outcropping that looked reasonably solid. If he could catch it . . .

He hit hard with his feet and felt a shooting pain go up his right leg. His knees buckled and his feet slid to the side, away from the outcropping, towards destruction.

One last thing. He reached out and caught the outcropping, keeping one hand around Alena's waist. For a moment he thought their momentum was still too great, but he was able to hold on. Alena skidded within feet of the opening.

Glenn didn't dare move. He could hear the harsh rasp of Alena's breathing. Meaning they were both alive. Alive!

Alena looked up at him with something in her eyes that might almost have been gratitude. He looked down at her and smiled. For a brief instant, she smiled back and his heart soared.

They backed out of the crevice and continued on up the cliff face. Glenn's right leg roared with pain, and he knew Alena could see that he was slowing down. But she didn't run away from him. She didn't take chances. She didn't say anything at all until they had reached the top, and the last dying rays of the sun painted them both blood-red.

"I'm sorry," she said softly.

He was about to say something, but the Can blatted in his ear. "What an image! Pan slowly across the sunset."

"Thanks," he said, bitterly, as Alena turned away.

SCHEDULE

"What the hell does Timberland know about making space suits?" Evan said. He threw down the thick ream of printouts and rubbed his face, pulling it into a comic mask of fatigue and frustration.

"They'll pay to do it," Jere said.

"Another prime sponsor." Sarcastically.

"What, like you're suddenly worried about our contestants?"

Evan shrugged and stood up to pace. "RusSpace finally got back to me."

"And?"

"And we're fucked."

For a moment, the word didn't even register with Jere. Then he heard the phrase like a physical blow. "Fucked! What does fucked mean, like they won't do it?"

"No, no."

"They want more money."

"It's 2019 now, not 2018."

No. They couldn't move it out again. GM and Boeing pulled out when the schedule last slid. So now it was Kia and Cessna for the Wheels and the Kites. Good names, yeah, but not blue-chip. Maybe it would boost the ratings, that bit of risk, that added chance . . .

Evan nodded. "Yeah, it's a crap cocktail, all right."

"We can't do this," Jere said. His voice sounded hollow and faraway.

Evan shrugged. "We have to."

"What's the problem this time? They lied again? They fucked up? What?"

"No." A sigh. "It's the testing that's killing us. Five drop

modules, five backout pods, five Wheels, five Kites, the big package of Returns, a ship with a fucking centrifuge, for God's sake, goddamn, it's a lot of shit to do!"

"So what do we do?"

"We push. Or we scale it back."

"What? Take it to three teams?"

"No. Scale back the build and the test. Leave out the backout pods, for example."

"What happens if the team can't make it to the Returns?"

A slow smile. "Tough snatch, said the biatch."

"What?"

"Before your time." Another shrug. This one slow, lazy, nonchalant. "If they can't make it to the Returns, they probably can't make it back."

"Will this get us back on track?"

"We could do more."

"What?"

"Skip final test of the Kites and the Wheels. All they are is a bunch of fabric and struts anyway."

"And?"

"Leave the spinner down on the ground."

"How are the contestants supposed to stay in shape?"

"We'll put in a whole lot of Stairmasters. They can exercise. Gets us another sponsor, too."

"And?"

"And that might get us back on track. Or so say our formerly communist friends."

"Will they guarantee it?"

"They aren't guaranteeing anything anymore. But I think it's a lot more likely that we'll make the deadlines if you drop some of the fluff."

Fluff. Yeah, fluff. Just a bunch of safety gear. Nobody will notice.

"We're taking a big chance."

"What's a bigger chance? Going to '19 or making a few changes?"

A few changes. Nothing big. Nothing major. Nothing we won't be crucified for if it comes out.

"Can we do this clean? Can we make it look like we never had plans for the centrifuge, the backout stuff, all that?"

"I'm sure we can arrange something."

Jere let the silence stretch out. Evan was watching him intently. In the dim light of the office, his weathered features could have been the craggy face of a demon.

"Do it," Jere said finally, softly. Hating himself.

REJECTION

Wheeling had been easy back on Earth. The training had been out in the Mojave, nice smooth sand and little rocks that you could bounce over easy, and nice and flat as far as you could see.

But Wheeling was a bitch and a quarter here on Mars. Keith Paul gritted his teeth as he came to another long downhill run, scattered with boulders as big as houses and ravines that could catch the edge of the wheel and fuck him up good. He'd already dug the Wheel out twice, once when he swerved to avoid a slope that would pitch it over and ended up in a ditch, and once when he got to bouncing and bounced over a hill into a ravine.

And man, did it bounce! Whenever it hit a rock. Sometimes a foot, sometimes a couple, sometimes ten or twenty feet in the air.

They probably got some good vid of my terrified mug, Keith

thought. That wasn't good. Weakness was never good.

But he was being strong on other things. He was making good time across the desert. He'd been up rolling at the moment dawn's light made the landscape even dimly guessable.

Other idiots are probably picking their way along like grandma in a traffic jam, he thought, and smiled. Because he was going to win.

And he was strong on the offers, too. Everyone had talked to him. Both the PA idjits, the associate director, Frank, everyone. They'd promised him everything but a blow-job and a hot dog, but the money hadn't changed.

Almost on cue, the voice. This time it was Frank.

"We're prepared to make you another offer," Frank said.

"Shoot."

"It's our final offer," Frank said. "And it's a very generous one. By air, you have a good chance of being able to pick up the Ruiz team and take the prize as well. You are currently leading the three remaining teams by a fair margin."

"What's the offer?"

"Three million. Plus all the gifts and benefits we've discussed before."

Keith shook his head.

"Keith?" Frank said.

"Yeah."

"What do you think?"

"I think you're very bad at math." Though the idea was intriguing. With three million, he could live pretty well down in Mexico . . .

No! Stupid! You're a winner. You're in the lead. Three is not thirty.

Frank sighed. "It's our final offer," he said.

"No."

Silence for a time. "Your decision has been noted," Frank said. He didn't sound surprised.

Noted?

"What does that mean?" Keith said. Like, were they going to try to disqualify him or something?

Silence.

"Ass! What the hell does 'noted' mean?"

Silence.

"Fuck you, then!"

Silence. On and on.

Was it possible that he could run this whole thing and not win due to some technicality? No. No. He was a winner. He was going to win.

And if they tried to take that away from him, God help them.

ASTRONAUT

Evan hadn't believed Jere about Russia. Now he did. All it took was a couple of days of traveling into the hinterlands in the awful winter chill, grabbing cold-slick vinyl seats as their drivers deftly slid around potholes on the treacherous black-iced roads, potholes that looked as if they could hide black bears, potholes that looked like they could swallow the car, potholes so big and deep and dark they might have gone straight through to some beautiful tropical beach in Brazil.

Now they were standing under the bulk of the main launcher, all four of them, Evan and John Glenn and even Ron Gutierrez, his ever-smiling dad. Not really John Glenn, of course, but that's what everyone called him. Frank Sellers, another good generic white-boy name. He was a wannabe-astronaut, never really flew anything after his training in the 80s, something about the shuttle blowing up. Now he was training to fly the Mars Enterprise (some money from the Roddenberry estate).

Frank was one of the concessions they'd won. The Russians could build it, fine, but it had to be an American pilot. The spikes on the preliminary audience surveys were real clear on that fact.

When Frank first came down, he'd referred to the Enterprise as the Trash Can, and the name had stuck. The comparison was apt. It was squatty and cylindrical, and it did have a utilitarian functionality, and it was even somewhat battered and dirty-looking.

"How goes it?" Evan said, after they'd made their intros.

"Good, good," Frank said. "We've had some problems with the electrical systems, nothing major, just the usual shakedown crap, and they're worried a bit about the air, but I think . . ."

"The air?" Ron said. "On a journey this long?"

Frank shrugged. "They'll make it work," he said.

"It doesn't seem very confidence-inspiring."

"If you could have seen half the stuff I saw behind the scenes at NASA, you wouldn't worry. These are good guys. They'll figure it out."

"If you say so."

The grand tour was less than impressive. Wires hung from open panels while teams of dirty Russians shot heated phrases back and forth with expressions of deep frustration and anger. There was a steady drip in the cockpit that tick-tick-ticked onto the synthetic material of the acceleration seat. When Ron ran a finger across it and looked up questioningly, Frank just shook his head. "Condensation. Can't help it with so many people in here. They'll flush it before we launch."

When we were back out in the freezing cold again, and well away from Russian ears, Ron turned to Jere and said, "Would you fly in this?"

"Of course," Jere said. Not a bit of hesitation. Not a bit. He knew how to deal with dad.

The older man looked up and down the ship. "If you need more money . . ."

And be even more in your debt? "No," Jere said.

"You sure?"

I'm sure I don't want to hear you remind me about how you bailed me out again. Jere nodded and turned to Evan. "We're on schedule?"

"Unless Frank tells me different."

"We'll make it," Frank said. "No problemo."

Later, when they were back in the car for another freezing, terrifying ride back to the hotel, Ron spoke again.

"Do you get the feeling that Frank wants this to work a little too much?"

"How's that?" Evan said.

"He's an astronaut. But he never flew."

"So?"

A frown. "So maybe he wants to fly. Really badly."

"Sometimes a little enthusiasm is a good thing," Evan said.

Ron turned to Jere. "What do you think?"

Pretend to consider, then answer. "I think it's good we have someone who loves what he does."

Silence from Ron. Then: "I hope you're right."

PERFORMANCE

Last. Dead last. No denying it now. No excuses. It had taken them way too long to assemble the Wheel that morning, far longer than they had taken back on Earth. Blame it on the cold, or the parts that didn't want to fit together, but facts were facts.

And yet Glenn was strangely happy, oddly content. Just

like that one freeclimb in Tibet, when it was clear they were beaten, hanging exhausted from numb fingertips beneath a thin sun rapidly disappearing behind a front of ominous purple-grey clouds. That moment when he realized they weren't going to make it, that they would have to go back down. The stress and the worry suddenly lifted from him. And his great surprise when Alena agreed with him. They scrambled down the rock as the icy rain hit.

They'd made love back in what passed for a hotel with incredible intensity, golden and yellow sparks flying in a perfect night sky, impossible to describe, infinite and endless in a moment's perfection. They'd finally collapsed, sated, face to face, sweat cooling to an icy chill in the cold room. He'd waited until her breathing had slowed, and lengthened, and deepened, then said, very softly, "Marry me."

Alena's eye's opened. In the dark they were like the glassy curve of two crystal spheres, unreadable.

"Yes," she said softly, and closed her eyes again.

Had he imagined it? Had she really heard him? He fell asleep with questions resonating in his mind.

When he woke in the morning, she was already pulling on her gear. Glenn had a moment of sleepy pleasure, watching her slim form, before he remembered his question – and her answer – from the night before.

She looked down at him. The light fell pale and grey on her face. She looked like the ghost of an angel.

"Yes," she said. "I said yes."

"Glenn!" Alena shrieked. "Watch out!"

Glenn jerked back to the present as the Wheel caromed off a boulder and promptly went bouncing across a field. He pulled on his harness and leaned outside of its edge, shortening the bounces on his side and bringing them back on course. They'd been experimenting with a new technique. Each of them leaned out the side of the Wheel, giving a better view of the terrain ahead than through the translucent dust-coated fabric, and allowing them to shift its direction more rapidly by leaning in and out to shift the center of gravity.

"Pay attention!" Alena said.

"I know, I know," Glenn said. "I'm sorry."

"What were you thinking?"

"Tibet," he said.

Silence for a time. "Oh."

"Remember?"

"I remember I don't like losing."

"We're making up time," Glenn said, after a while.

"I know."

"The others may have problems with the Kite."

Alena shot him a puzzled look. "Why are you trying to make me feel better?"

Because I love you, Glenn thought. *That's another thing I never wanted to lose.*

OVERSIGHT

The spooks came in the middle of February sweeps, just three months before launch. Jere and Evan were still trying to convince themselves that making the August sweeps would be better than February, but no matter how you garnished it or rationalized it, there would be less access in the summer. Now some of the sponsors wanted guaranteed access levels or kick-backs.

And now this.

"Mr Gutierrez?" There were two of them, wearing indistinguishable blue suits. One of them wore a cheap black tie, the



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LAUNCH

other a turtleneck. Their eyes were heavy and dead and immobile, and for once Jere was glad that his father was there with him.

He looked at the ID, not seeing the name. It was one of those new fancy holo things that they were trying to sell to everyone, but this one had a big NASA logo and a discreet little eye next to it. He was also wearing a small gold motion-holo pin that flashed and gleamed as the eye morphed into a world and back again. Underneath the holo were the etched letters: USG OVERSIGHT.

"Yes," Jere said.

Agent #1 turned to his father. "And you, sir?"

"I'm Ron."

"Ron . . ."

"Gutierrez."

"Ah. The father. We didn't know you had a stake in this."

"I'm an investor."

"Ah."

Jere held up a hand. "Would you like a seat? Coffee?"

Agent #1 sat. The other remained standing.

"What's this all about?" Jere asked. "Do you want to buy the program, or something?"

"There will be no program."

"What!" Jere and Ron said, at once.

The agent just looked at them. "We can't permit the launch."

"You're going to stop a launch on Russian soil?"

"When the launch could be part of a terrorist attack, yes, I'm sure the Russians will cooperate."

"Terrorist! Where do you get that?"

"What if someone was to take over your launch, and turn it back at the US? How big of a crater could he make if it went down on a city?"

Ron's face was red. "That's . . . idiotic!"

"What do you want?" Jere asked.

"We want to prevent any possible attack on the United States."

Ron nodded, sudden understanding gleaming in his eyes. "China."

"Excuse me?"

"China's bitching about our program, aren't they?"

The agent shrugged. "It is your option to speculate."

"So what do you want?" Jere said. "How do we launch?"

"You don't. However, if you turn the program over to us, and allow us to send qualified observers, we would provide proper acknowledgement of your role in this endeavor."

"We can't do that!" Jere said. "What about our sponsors? They'll come for our heads. Hell, the Russian Mafia will come for our heads, too! We can't just hand this over to you."

"I'm sure we can placate the Russians. And your sponsors."

Jere slumped back in his chair. They could do almost anything they wanted. He could be picked up and whisked away and never seen again. He could have everything taken from him piece by piece, a Job job.

Taking their offer might be the best bet. Of course, he'd have to get Evan in on it, but maybe there was some way to profit from it anyway. When you were talking deep pockets, the government had the deepest pockets of all. Maybe they could spin it . . .

"No fucking way!" Ron said. His face was almost purple. He levered himself up out of his chair and went to tower over the seated agent. The standing one tensed, but didn't move. Ron poked a finger in his chest. "We're not going to Mars to plant fucking flags!"

"Dad . . ."

"Shut up." Low and deadly. "Did the fucking pilgrims come to plant fucking flags?" Ron said. "No! They came to get away from bureaucratic fucks like you! You assholes had your chance. How many billions did we give to you shitpoles? What did we get for it? Our lunar rovers in Chinese museums! A bunch of rusting hardware crash-landed on Mars. Thanks. Thanks a lot. Now it's our chance!"

Jere watched his dad, open-mouthed. He was frozen in place.

Agent #2 put his hand on Agent #1's shoulder and whispered something in his ear. Agent #1 nodded and stood up. "So you refuse to turn over the program?"

"Damn fuckin' right," Ron said.

The two swiveled to look at Jere. "And does he speak for you?"

Jere looked at his father. He looked back steadily, intently. He nodded, just a fraction.

"Get out of here," Jere said.

I hope you're right, dad, he thought. Or we're both dead.

MIRAGE

Leaving the IBM package was one thing, but the slide was inexcusable. Geoff Smith squeezed his eyes tight shut. If only he could turn back the clock! All it would have taken was a glance, and a five-second diversion, and everything would have been all right.

Now, his best possible fate was winning a prize. And then having to endure the endless interviews that came after it.

And now, flying over the rugged Martian terrain, it looked like they might actually have a chance. Chatter from the Can: the felon's Kite setup wasn't going smoothly, his lead had evaporated, and every second left him further behind. The extreme sports geeks had never really been in the running. They'd been slow at everything.

Money, he thought dreamily, opening his eyes, watching the landscape pass below. *Money money money*.

He'd hoped that he could make another slide as Laci and Wende built the Kite, but his water was lost and they didn't let him have the time. And truth was, he didn't really feel like it. He was in a haze, as if losing the slide had taken all the fight out of him.

Of course, he could scope the dust all he wanted when they were back on the Can, but that would be surface dust. What if the dust had to be from a few feet down? Or what if the dust had to be from near the water flows that they had seen from MGS, so many years ago? What if he'd never had a chance at all, and they knew that, and they didn't care? His thoughts whirled like a cyclone, all destructive energy and dark currents.

Wende looked back at him from the pilot's sling and smiled at him. Geoff tried to smile back, but his lips felt frozen in place. After a moment, Wende turned away and gestured at Laci. Laci looked back at him and frowned.

Yes, I know you don't like me, he thought. You've made that abundantly clear. Now turn back around and be a good copilot.

Laci was probably thinking how much faster they would be running if he accidentally fell off. He looked up nervously at his tether, but it was solid and unfrayed.

His head swam for a moment, and he shook it. His vision blurred and doubled as if his head was a giant bell that had just been struck. He gripped his perch tighter and held still. After a moment, it passed. The landscape streamed by beneath him, soothing and hypnotic.

We've always looked down at the surface of Mars and imagined things. First, God of War. Next, an arid desert world where intelligence clung to life with massive feats of engineering. Then the dead and dry thing we know today.

But it wasn't dead! He knew there was life here.

The landscape had changed again from dunefield to dark rocks, rectilinear and almost artificial in appearance. It reminded him of ancient Mayan ruins. Or was it Egypt? Or Stonehenge?

Details swam and ran and resolved themselves again. The rectilinear lines became sharper and more regular. Now he could see individual stones, etched into fantastic designs by the passage of time.

Etched? By what? He shook his head again, and details leaped out: fantastic whorls and patterns, ancient art of the highest order. It wasn't etched by weather. It was etched by intelligence!

Were those patterns he saw in the sand as well? Did they cover ancient squares where people once gathered? For a blinding instant, he could see the entire city as it had stood, towering, over the rough Martian surface . . .

"Stop!" he cried. His voice sounded strangely high and strangled.

"What?" Wende said. "Why?"

"It's them!" Geoff said. "Intelligence! The city below us . . . there's a city below us!"

The two looked down, scanning back and forth with puzzled looks.

"Geoff?" Wende said. "What are you talking about?"

"The city! Look at the stones! They're square! Look at the language on them!"

"Geoff, that isn't funny."

A crackle. The voice of Frank Sellers from the Can. "What do you see?"

"A city," Geoff said. "The remains of a city. Stones. Writing! Decoration!"

"Land," Frank said.

"No way!" Laci said.

"The Roddenberry clause says you have to investigate any overt evidence of life," Frank said. "Sorry."

"But there's nothing below us!" Wende said. "Just a rock-field."

"Land. You have to. Contract breach if you don't."

"Shit!" Laci said. Wende grumbled, but they began to fall from the sky.

"Turn around," Geoff said. "The best part is behind us."

Wende wheeled around and he saw it all, the geometric perfection, the ancient city and all its splendor.

"I still don't see it," Wende said. "Frank, can you review our last imagery?"

"Yep," Frank said. "Continue landing. It'll take me a few minutes."

Wende picked a relatively clear section of sand and for a moment they were all acting as landing gear, running over the sand.

Geoff's legs felt heavy and weak, and he buckled under the weight of the Kite. Down this close, he could see nothing. Rocks were just rocks. Sand was just sand. There was no great city.

"Geoff? You alright?" That was Wende. Pretty Wende. Nice of her to think about him.

Frank's voice crackled back on. "False alarm," he said. "I don't see anything other than some regular volcanic cracking. That's probably what fooled you, Geoff."

"I'm no fool!" he shouted. He had seen it! He had!

Silence for a time. Finally: "What does Geoff look like? Is he blue?"

"No," Wende said. "But he looks funny. Patchy, splotchy. Oh, shit. Does he have a bug?"

"More likely an oxy malfunction. He may be cranked up too high. Funny, that usually doesn't cause hallucinations, but . . ."

"I saw it!" Geoff cried.

Wende was shrugging out of her harness.

"No," Laci said. "Wende, get back in your harness. We need to fly!"

"It'll only take a minute," Frank said.

"It won't kill him."

"Yes it will. Eventually."

"Then we take the chance."

Wende had stopped shrugging out of her harness, under Laci's hard glare. Frank said nothing. Geoff watched them for a moment, thinking, *I saw it! I did! I really did!* There was a distant babble on the comm and things got very bright.

Then Wende's face bent over him. "I'm not like the other monster," she said. "Let's get him fixed up."

"Good girls," Frank said. "Here, open his panel and look for . . ."

He said it would only take a minute, but it took over ten. When they were all back on board and soaring into the sky, even the Rothman team had passed them.

RETRACTION

NASA came back. This time with two grinning executives and their own camera crew. Following them were fifty thousand people who jammed the Burbank streets in cars and on bikes and on foot, holding banners saying 'Free Enterprise!' and 'New frontiers, not new Oversight!' and of course, 'NASA SUCKS!'.

Jere and Evan couldn't help grinning.

Within a day, the video of the NASA/Oversight shakedown had been posted on a thousand message boards and ten thousand blogs. The raw video almost brought the AV IM network to its knees in the US, Japan, France, Russia, and even parts of China. A thousand pundits spouted off about 'The New Stalin', 'The New Face of Censorship', the fact that the Constitution had long been paved over, the free-enterprise foundation of the country, and the 'Taking of the New Frontier'.

The New Frontier had struck the core audience like a well-spoken diatribe supporting socialized health care at a meeting of Reformed Republicans. Survivalists polished their weapons and streamed out of the Sierras and Appalachians and half-forgotten Nebraska missile silos to demonstrate. TrekCon 18 turned into a huge caravan that converged on Sacramento, trapping senators in their buildings, demanding the governor secede so that Neteno could go about its business. Eventually, over a million people gathered there, some in overalls and prickly beards and armed with shotguns, some wearing Klingon outfits, some housewives in SUVs, some businessmen

who worked in aviation and space and engineering. In three days, two slogans were posted at over ten million websites, plastered on bumper stickers, hung from suction-cups behind windows: *Free Enterprise*, and *Give Us New Frontiers*.

Three days after the video hit the net, Jere received a discreet phone call from a higher-up at NASA/Oversight. Jere made his own counteroffer.

A day after that, he received another phone call, politely accepting the prime sponsorship for the mission, for a price greater than the entire funds they had collected to date. The launch would go forward as planned. Jere and Evan were still the primes. The only difference was that there would be another discreet logo added on the ship and the suits.

Evan looked at Jere as the NASA mucky spouted off about "New Partnership with Business," and how wonderful this opportunity was under the big Neteno sign out in front of the building. The press had built a wall around the crowd with cameras and laptops and transmission equipment. The crowd looked happy, vindicated, relieved. As if they were thinking, *Good, good, we still have the power, we still live in a free country.*

"We are proud to be able to support this effort," the mucky said. "For less than the cost of a single robotic Mars lander, we are sending the first manned mission to Mars. With this mission, we have again leaped ahead of the Chinese. We see this as a model for future exploration of space: USG Oversight and private industry, working hand-in-hand to accomplish our goals."

Some applause, some boos, some catcalls. But it was done. They were back on track. It even got them their advertising hook: *Free Enterprise*. That was really catching on in a big way, simmering around the net.

So now it's more than a game, he thought. It's a demonstration of some of the things that people will need to do to conquer the red planet. Or at least we spin it that way.

He looked at Evan and his hard, unblinking eyes.

To him, it was still just a game.

A game played hard, winner take all.

DYING

Frank was lying to them again. Mike Kinsson didn't blame him. What was he going to tell them otherwise? *Sorry, you're out of luck, best to just ditch the headers and pop off quick.*

"We're still seeing if we can rig one of the Returns for remote operation," Frank said.

"How much longer?" Juelie whined.

It was the morning of the third day. Later, Mike would go and wander around. Juelie and Sam looked like two teenagers who had just discovered sex, and they were probably happy to have the privacy. He'd already walked over to the nearby cliffs, turning over rocks, hoping beyond hope to see the tell-tale carpet of a lichen. He still remembered the first time his mother and father had taken him to the Griffith Observatory, and they had talked about what life might be like on other planets. Lichens and primitive plants for Mars, they'd said. It had fascinated him in a way that nothing had ever done, before or since.

"We're hoping to have a definitive answer by the end of the day," Frank said.

"What if it takes longer?" Sam said.

"Then we wait."

"We're running out of food!" Juelie said.

"We know. Please conserve your energy."

They both looked at Mike. Mike looked right back at them,

thinking, *Like what you were doing wasn't more strenuous than my walk.*

He edged away from them. What would they do when they found out there really wasn't any rescue coming? Maybe it would be best just to wander off, and stay wandered off.

"He's walking away!" Juelie said.

"Mild physical exertion won't hurt," Frank said.

They didn't come after him.

He walked past the cliffs from the day before and came to a place where sand and rocks made a steep slope down into a small valley. Rivulets had been cut in the surface of the slope, some still knife-edged.

He remembered old satellite images. Could he be near a place where water was near the surface? He paused to dig into one of the little channels, but turned up only dry sand and dust and pebbles.

He wandered on. He'd keep walking, and see where his feet took him. Until it was time to lay down and turn down the heaters as far as they went. Maybe some real pioneer, fifty years from now, would find his desiccated body and say, *This is the other guy, the one who wandered away from camp.*

It wasn't a pleasant thought.

But it was better than imagining Juelie and Sam, when the real news came down.

LAUNCH

Russian summer was the same as Russian winter, except the black ice had been replaced by mud. And it was an entire caravan this time, reporters and pundits and hangers-on, all loudly complaining about the facilities. They swarmed the tiny town, like ants on a dead cockroach. Reporters slept in taverns, in houses, in barns, in the street if they had to. NO FOOD signs hung from many of the restaurants and bars.

"Shouldn't they pay us extra for the tourism?" Evan said.

"It won't last," Jere said.

"Sure it will. There are enough bored reporters around here to crank out five thousand local-interest pieces. And people will travel anywhere."

Then it was launch day, and Jere didn't know how to feel. He should be worried. He should be thinking about what would happen if the whole shebang blew up on the ground. If that happened, everyone would howl for blood. They would be crucified. If they were lucky.

All because they didn't get their daily dose of excitement. A-muse-ment, Ron used to call it. Non-thinking. To muse is to think, and to A-muse was not to think. Which is what most people wanted. Give them a roof and food and someone to screw, let them buy a few shiny things from time to time, and all they really cared about was filling the gaping void of their lives. They didn't want to muse. They wanted to A-muse.

And God help the person who promised amusement, but didn't come through.

It was a short ride to the launch site. The crowd outside the gates parted for them as they drove to the official grandstand and made their way to the little box at the top. Ron collapsed in his seat with a grunt. Jere and Evan bookended him. They were sitting on campchairs that looked like they could have come from a Napoleonic campaign.

"Crunch time," Evan said softly.

"Yes," Ron said.

"Anyone in a betting mood?" He rubbed his hands.

"Shut up," Ron said.

Again, Jere was glad to have the old man. Without Ron,

Evan would have woven a web tighter and tighter. Evan still held too many pursestrings, and was hiding a lot of money, but they could deal with that later.

Ahead of them, the ship towered over the bleak landscape. Gleaming steel and clouds of vapor, a high-tech pillar aimed at the deep blue sky.

One minute. The few people on the field scampered to cover. Ten seconds.

Jere held his breath.

The numbers flickered down on the big board.

There was an explosion of light and a mind-numbing roar. The plexiglas windows of the little booth jittered and shook.

Jere held up a hand to shield his eyes. *It's exploded, it's all over, it's done, I'm done.*

But then the cheering of the crowd roused him. He looked at them in disbelief. What were they cheering for? Were they crazy? Did they actually want to see blood?

Then his father pointed and shouted, "Look!"

The pillar was rising into the sky.

Slowly at first, then faster. It was a hundred feet up. Two hundred. Then as tall as a skyscraper, balancing on a long white tail of flame. The wind battered the grandstand and beat at the throngs, standing hundreds deep. The smell of burnt mud and concrete worked its way into the shelter. Sand and dust and grit pattered against the plexiglas.

My God, Jere thought, as Mars Enterprise rose higher. Its flame no longer touched the earth. It gathered speed like a jet, shrinking smaller and faster as it rose up and arced out.

Eventually, the roar reduced itself to a shout, then a mild grumbling. Mars Enterprise was a bright speck in the sky.

They had done it.

"Congratulations," Ron said.

"For what?" Jere said.

His dad allowed himself a thin grin. "You've done something that no government has ever been able to do."

"But . . . it wasn't . . . it was just a . . ."

Ron held up a hand. "Shh," he said.

HONEYMOON

"Come on!" Alena said. "Come on come on come on!"

The Can had been embargoing status of the teams for an hour, but Glenn knew they were close. They'd made it from dead last to nearly tied with the Paul guy before they shut up.

"What can I do?" he asked.

"I don't know! I was talking to the Kite, not you!"

"I'll think positive thoughts."

"Good for you!"

Glenn smiled. And what could he do, other than stay lashed up under the belly of the Kite for minimum aerodynamic drag? Nothing.

The next one they should make more manual, he thought. *Human-powered Kites and Wheels. None of this motor crap.*

"Look!" Alena pointed.

Glenn strained his eyes. Very far in the distance, he could just catch the glint of metal. "Is that it?"

"Yeah, that's it! Come on come on come on come on!"

Alena looked at him, and he saw the girl who he'd fallen in love with, the woman he'd proposed to. She was smiling, her color high and eyes flashing. It was impossible not to love her when she was winning.

Where was Paul? If the race was as close as he thought, he should be able to see his Kite, bright white against the pale sky. He scanned from left to right, but saw nothing.

Whoever makes it to the Returns, wins. They were automatic. There was no way to race to orbit.

Another look. No Kite. Was it possible that Paul had run into trouble? Could they really be first?

Karma will get you all the time, he thought.

From ahead of them, a bright flare. The kite rocked as Alena started violently.

"No!" she said. "No no no no no!"

"Paul," Glenn said.

"How much longer?" Alena asked.

"A couple of minutes. But it's . . ."

"Go faster!"

"It only takes three minutes to orbit!"

"I don't care!" Her face was twisted into a mask of anguish.

Glenn fell silent and let the only sound be that of the rushing wind and roaring motor. The Return field grew ahead of them, big enough so they could see the remains of Paul's Kite. He had had a hard landing.

When they landed, Alena scrambled to the nearest return pod and began the launch prep. But when the prep was still less than halfway done, the voices from the Can came back. This time it was the female PA. She sounded tired.

"We have a winner," she said. "Keith Paul is now back on board the Mars Enterprise. To our other teams, thank you for a great competition. Please travel safely on your way back. There's no need to hurry now."

"No!" Alena wailed. She beat on the low bench of the Return pod. Glenn tried to gather her in his arms, but she pushed him away violently. He tumbled out onto the cold sand and lay for a moment, stunned, staring up at the alien sky.

"Glenn?" Glenn shook his head, but said nothing.

"Glenn?" Frightened.

She came out of the pod and knelt atop him, her eyes red from crying. "Glenn!" she said, shaking him.

"What?" he said.

"Glenn, I can't hear you! Are you okay?"

"What?" He reached behind him and felt the suit's radio. It seemed okay. Of course, he could have hit something in his fall . . . He shrugged and gave her the thumb-and-forefinger 'OK' sign.

"I heard you hit and a big hiss and I thought you'd broken your header." She was crying even more now, big tears hitting the inside of her header and running down towards her chest.

He pushed his header to hers. "I'm okay," he said.

"I can hear you now."

"Yeah, old trick."

She helped him up. The return pod gaped open like a mouth.

"Let's go," she said.

"Wait a minute." Glenn looked from the Return pods – all four of them – to the sky, and then towards the east, where the Ruiz team was stranded.

Could they? Would it be possible to fly over to the Ruiz team and pick them up? Would they have enough fuel? Could they refuel?

"Alena," he said. "Do you want to be a real winner?"

She got it. Her eyes got big, and she nodded. She stayed helmet-to-helmet with him as she called the Can.

"Frank," she said. "Let's talk about the Ruiz team."

SHOW

Evan, again with his presentations. In the darkness of Jere's office, animated charts showed realtime Viewing Audience, feedback Ratings, inferred Attentiveness, inferred Buyer Moti-

vation, plotted against Neteno's historicals and an average of other Linear, Free-Access networks.

"We broke the 'Near downtrend,'" Jere said. "Broke it hard."

"We should have charged more for the advertising," Evan said. "VA times BM is a record for 'Near networks, maybe even interactives."

"We're swimming in money."

"Or we could up the ad rates midcourse. They won't desert now."

"Or we could just do another show."

"Not with the average sequel return at 58%," Evan said.

Jere frowned. That was a big hole. Unless they could keep costs down. And maybe they could. All the development was done, after all . . .

"Don't even think it," Evan said.

"What?"

"Doing another show."

"I'm not."

Evan shook his head. "I know that look. That starry-eyed shit that gave us the second Star Wars threequel. The one with that irritating droopy bastard, whatever his name was . . ."

Jere shuddered. "I know who you're talking about."

"Point is, this show ain't golden. And we aren't perfect. Leave it now and let them clamor for more."

"Like *Star Trek*."

"Damn right. Don't come back till they're jonesing for it."

Jere nodded. *We're on top*, he thought. *We're the magnet. Let the ideas come to us for a while.*

And let that be enough.

WINNER

"I won, right?" Keith Paul said.

"Yeah," Frank said.

"I'll get the money?"

"Yeah."

"So where are the cameras?"

Frank ripped off his earplug and pushed away from the comm board. He grabbed Keith's shirt with both hands and pulled him close. The momentum took them off the floor, spinning through Mars Enterprise's command center.

"There are no cameras!" Frank yelled. His eyes were wide and bright, quivering with that adrenaline-fueled, amped-up look that guys got when they were ready to take you apart with their bare hands. Keith had seen that look a few times in his life, and he knew one thing: he wanted absolutely no part of it.

"Nobody fucking cares about you!" Frank screamed, shaking Keith like he was made out of tissue. "Everyone's watching the real fucking heroes now! You'll get your goddamned money, just like you wanted, but don't expect anyone to care! Now fuck off! I've got important things to do!"

Frank gave him one last shove, pushing Keith into the bulkhead above. His head clanged on metal and he saw stars.

"Okay, man, okay," Keith said, as Frank drifted slowly back down and took his seat.

"Get out of here," Frank said.

HEROES

"Look at these showboating dickweeds," Evan said.

In the hushed velvet darkness of the live feed room, Evan's words were incredibly loud. Technicians swiveled to look at him, then turned quickly away when they saw Jere and Ron.

They were all looking at the competitive feeds. The slice-and-dice screen showed the story. Fox, Helmers, and the SciFi Channel were all tuned on a crappy little town down in Mexico, where a slim needle was being assembled in a shabby old warehouse. Outside, a makeshift derrick grew from a field of concrete. And some hairy guy wearing a dirty coverall was talking about building a colony ship to send to Mars. He called it Mayflower II.

"They timed it," Evan said. "Perfect. They wait till we have the Ruiz team back safe and sound, then they spring this shit."

But it was nothing, Jere thought. Just an incomplete ship. A bunch of nuts talking about open-source technology and crap like that. Who cared?

"They knew the ratings would die the instant everyone was back in the Can," Evan said. "They knew it, and they are fucking taking it!"

"What are the ratings like?" Jere said.

Evan shook his head and clicked on the realtime feed. The downward spike was still small, but he could see it accelerating. As he watched, it clicked down a few pixels more.

"Do we have anyone down in Mexico?" Evan said. "Can we get a line on this colony crap too?"

"No," Jere said.

"Shit. Shit, shit."

It's just a news story, Jere thought. *One they'll forget as soon as they log off.*

But Ron was watching the competitive feeds, his jaw set hard, his eyes bright and glassy. Intent. Hungry. Excited. Jere knew that look. He shivered.

"Get on camera," Ron said, not looking away from the feeds.

"What?" Evan said.

"Get your butts down to the newsroom and get on camera now!" Ron said, finally looking at them. "Before they all tune out."

"Why?" Jere said.

"Tell them this is what you wanted. *Winning Mars* wasn't just a show. This is what you intended all along."

"But we didn't . . ."

"Yes," Ron said. "You did."

In the blue light of the monitors, Evan's expression of confusion suddenly bloomed into an excited smile.

"Will it work?" Jere said, looking at Ron.

Evan made a disgusted noise. "You probably believed the one about Washington never telling any lies, didn't you?"

In the monitors, another talking head, saying they wanted to launch sometime in the next 24 months. Looking scared.

They'll never make it, Jere thought.

They'll fucking die up there.

But if they do . . .

Ron, looking at the slice-and-dice, openly smiling now.

"Come on," Evan said. "Let's go make our legacy."

JASON STODDARD

Jason is an active member of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America (SFWA). His professional writing credits include a first place win in L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of the Future contest for the novella 'Kinship', appearing in Volume XX. He's also published a series of short stories in *Strange Horizons*, and in several semi-pro venues including *Far Sector* and *Fiction Inferno*. More information is available at <http://www.jasonstoddard.net>.



Ducks In Winter by Neal Blaikie

illustrated by Richard Marchand

Hiroshige scooped up the dark between the blackened stars. Legs stretched taut, arms flattened at its sides, Hiroshige threw back its head and accelerated through the lightless void. Its thoughts, focused now along the ancient wavelength, tingled with a nascent excitement. At the end of the trajectory Hiroshige followed, swinging dully around a long-dead sun, something was producing a weak trickle of heat, releasing it into the cosmos.

And heat was a rarefied signature of light.

Deep inside Hiroshige's adamantine body, dark matter particles were being fused into opulent energies, sweet fuel for the engines that drove it shuddering through the long black night. All along the inside of its skin, living circuits sloughed protective shrouds, shook off webs of sleep and reticence. Filaments of gold and whispering glass, twined together with soft manic urgency, filled Hiroshige with a shimmering delight, spread a soft pulsing joy through its hunkering matrices.

Finally, after eons of nothingness and inertia, Hiroshige had a purpose. Pushing hard, it plummeted onward.

Light had been abundant once, when the universe was young.

Radiating in all directions, from suns both virulent and serene, light had given life and spread it; had shone and seared and fallen. And then, through ages vast and ever darker, light had finally gone out, had disappeared, gone somewhere else. For all of recorded memory there had been no light glimpsed or detected. Its existence, while theoretically necessary, had become as particulated as legend.

For timespans greater than the age of galaxies, Hiroshige had been searching for light or some memory of light's passing. So long had it searched, so relentlessly had it pursued a thing it had never seen, that Hiroshige no longer knew why it searched. I am Hiroshige and I search for light, it thought, and for untold millennia that had been enough. Through cold darknesses and the sad ion trails of long-dead suns; through ancient rivers of information, remnants of civilizations burnt-out and fading; through emptinesses more vast and meaner than thought, Hiroshige's search had continued without question or result.

Until now.

As Hiroshige slipped into orbit around the frozen world, long-dormant heat sensors lifted and fell on its segmented, attenuated neck. Fingers danced and curled in excitement and anticipation. Subroutines of subroutines, layers of data buried deep in Hiroshige's brain, began to assimilate and enter its awareness. For somewhere below, in the weak well of the planetary surface, something was radiating like a beacon, leaking wave after wave of heat into space.

Slowly Hiroshige spiraled inward, the weak gravity a cushion, and landed softly in a crouch, sensors alert and probing. But there was nothing in its immediate vicinity except soft pings of heat, absolute blackness, and the rough sucking sensation of feet set down on surprisingly moist sand. Gently it rose, drawing itself toward the heat source, arms extended, fingers curling, forming patterns of expectation in the dark. Then it stopped. For there in front of it, rising out of the muddled

ground, its shape a distorted echo of Hiroshige's own, was the thing it sought, the place from which the heat emanated.

Tentatively, cautiously, Hiroshige began to circle the object, sending waves of sense-plasma at it, flinching in astonishment each time a returning information packet revealed more and more of the object's dimensions, thrumming with excitement as further packets revealed its structure. While it seemed to have a shape that roughly mirrored Hiroshige's own, it was composed entirely of compressed flakes of dead stellar matter, a statue sculpted from the remnants of fierce, ancient energies.

In size, the thing was slightly smaller than Hiroshige, though similarly proportioned. It stood in the wet sand as though, once living, it had been caught unaware and frozen in time. Its arms, short and bi-jointed, with only five stubby, malformed fingers on each hand, reached upward, hands open, as if trying to hold up the sky. Its head, too, was small, resting tensely on a short, thick stump of a neck.

But it was the face that disturbed Hiroshige the most. It was round rather than long, with a small, infantile mouth. Its nose, as briefly sensed as an afterthought, seemed quite useless, decorative perhaps. And above the nose, where Hiroshige's face was smooth and cantilevered, were two small bumps with fibers growing out of them, set below a rounded forehead that sloped abruptly backward. Repulsed but fascinated, Hiroshige pinged the statue's head with incredulous, staccato bursts, unable to accept its own perceptions, unable to turn away.

Then Hiroshige detected movement along the surface of the statue, sensed fluid streaming languidly down the statue's cheeks, followed the liquid's path as it dripped relentlessly to the sodden sand below.

The statue appeared to be crying.

Hiroshige reached out to touch an ossified arm, then drew back in shock. Even with all sensors dampened, parameters tamped down to the infinitesimal, the heat was unbearable, as if Hiroshige were witnessing an act of creation. Slowly it reached out once more, grasping the same limb, and held on, heat coruscating down its own arms, suffusing its body with cold black energy. Then Hiroshige leaned forward, head canted sideways, tongue extended, and licked the statue's cheek with a long, gentle scraping motion. The fluid was caustic on its tongue, burning with latent information, and Hiroshige was thrown backward, landing with a sickening squish in the wet sand, its senses overloaded, its processors crippled and screaming.

Hiroshige lay still for several seconds as its systems worked to restore themselves, its mind trying to assimilate the data that had assaulted it. Slowly it made its way back to lambent volatility and sat up, gripped by vertigo and a complex form of data fugue that was analogous to nausea. Its backup protocols either damaged or otherwise occupied, Hiroshige was momentarily uncertain of everything, inhabited for a nano-second a gray space devoid of thought or awareness.

Before the collapse of all mental processes, in the metaspace between thought and action, images of a floating world suffused Hiroshige's consciousness with light.

The return of thought was heralded by a taste in Hiroshige's mouth. Face down in the sand, its limbs asprawl, associations were being made deep in Hiroshige's brain. Tables left unchecked since its creation were being activated and scanned; flavors were being savored and compared. A sheet of blackness larger than the cosmos was stretched taut across the infinite space that was Hiroshige's mind, and numbers, momentary smears of light, began to scroll across and down its surface, blurring and changing, trying for a combination that was lying unused somewhere far, far below the level of tacit awareness.

Ah, there it is, Hiroshige almost thought, though the data were arrived at too quickly for a linear acknowledgment. Hiroshige's actual experience, like a hummingbird darting from consciousness to sensation to recognition, had no moments of hesitation, no spaces in which confusion could float and taunt. So while the mechanism that ran unseen, unheard, unthought beneath the surface of Hiroshige's mind did its work, Hiroshige only knew that the substance was sweet, soft and rough, watery and cool. That it tasted like . . . watermelon. Yes, that was it. Watermelon.

Hiroshige was too stunned to move.

As Hiroshige became aroused by further anomalies, it noticed that its right hand was touching something soft and crisp, wet and cool. It was confused by the novelty of feeling in its hand, even while it calmly remembered that there were once organic beings whose sensors covered their entire skin, whose skin was not a casing but an external organ. Could its sensors be malfunctioning? Why did its hand feel so odd, so small? How could it be hearing that snorting sound, feeling that wet thing brushing its ear, snuffling around its face? Where was all this data coming from? What did it mean?

Hiroshige rolled over and sat up, and was overwhelmed by new sensations, information that was both familiar and unexpected. It ran its hands over its body and discovered that it was covered with a loose, thin shell, and that the skin beneath was soft and warm.

Hiroshige carefully reached up to touch its face, and discovered that its head was now round and smooth, its forehead bumpy and backward sloping. And in the absence where Hiroshige's dark matter scoop had flared up and out toward the dead black stars that once held the light it had always sought – in that space where time and matter commingled to produce rare and subtle energies, cold fuels that fed the hunger that was Hiroshige's life – two small, round lumps with fibers growing out of them shivered under Hiroshige's touch.

Eyes, it thought, as if the memory were sizzling along the length of its tongue, as if the information had been contained in the taste of fruit already drying in Hiroshige's mouth. And along with this recognition came a thought: I have been given eyes with which to see. I must be in the presence of light.

With these words Hiroshige was jolted into a state of complete and utter awareness, an instantaneous meshing of program with experience. And it opened its new eyes and saw light pouring through air as thick as the darkness between the stars falling on objects with names from memories attached and labels affixed meanings described in colors and angles of clarity shapes and symbols appearing expanding turning away seeing still more light and more shapes taking on definition as definition became a mode of being of seeing the things the details the shades of blue the green gray sand the water lapping at its heels the dogs with their collars glinting the metal flashing in the light from the sun the burning rocks and boats afloat the brown wooden wheel squeaking in the warm wind turning

toward the village with roofs of orange like the sun as if a hand had reached up and chipped off pieces that had landed on the houses the shops the temples had bled along the horizon and coated the trunks of trees the leaves blowing in the breeze floating to the ground and the specks that moved against the sky grew large grew near became the people the lives that kicked the dogs and held the leash lying torn and dragging in the sand at their tiny feet that splashed in the water past the watermelon rinds with greens and reds and whites spots of black all the colors of the rainbow that arched across the blue blue sky and it closed its new eyes, let the lids slide back like shades drawn over a window at night, let the flood of information and sensation and feeling, the string of meanings, the list of definitions and context wash over it like all the energies of the universe collapsing into one bright moment of intense revelation, a scorching image pressed forever into a pane of endless glass.

Hiroshige, its eyes held tight tight shut, sat down in the sand, drew huge draughts of air into its newly minted lungs, exhaled loudly in a sigh that surely must be strong enough to cause leaves to blow chattering through the streets of the nearby village. It felt its heart, the strange moist organ that now thrummed excitedly in its chest; heard blood, the warm salty fluid, pulse purposefully through its pounding temples. And Hiroshige understood, knew that it now inhabited an organic body, a soft, weak template for its own magnificent form. That it was now in the presence of light.

Far away in the distance, Hiroshige could hear the sound of bells chuckling in the evening air.

Once again it opened its eyes. And turned.

For Hiroshige, time had always been measured by the leaden pulse of particles decaying, the wan collapse of matter, and its own slow passage through empty space. Now time had accelerated and shattered, scattering in all directions as the amplitude of implicate order unfolded like lotus blossoms, revealing manifold dimensions of compactified complexity. The movement of dogs and people, the wash of air across Hiroshige's strange new face, the boats lulling in the harbor; all rushed by in a frenzy of sensation, then were neatly rolled up in hidden creases in the fabric of the moment. Birds twittered restlessly in the trees Hiroshige passed beneath, and it felt its feet glide silently over the loamy soil, gently enough that Hiroshige was certain not a single grain of sand was turned over or disturbed as it walked.

The path Hiroshige followed rose and dipped, tracing the contour of the land, gracefully winding up and back as it approached the edge of the village. The sun was lower now in the sky, the sky a brilliant red fading to ochre bleaching to white, and the trees stood out against the horizon like veins in alabaster skin. The village was almost invisible in the glare, but Hiroshige could see the shapes of people moving, dark smudged sticks of green and blue and black floating and bobbing in the hazy sunlight, punctuating the sullen air like dancing notes of music or scintillating motes of dust.

After walking a bit further, Hiroshige found itself on a bluff overlooking the village. Turning to its left, it was met by a large tree, an aged sentinel hanging passively, its limbs reaching upward, hungry for the light, their weight pulling the trunk downward, curving and bending it. One lone branch grew down toward the ground, as if it had given up on the sun, curling around itself to form a large circle, then continuing downward to the earth.

As Hiroshige turned back toward the path, the stillness was broken by a susurrus of tinkling laughter behind it, and a voice that felt like honey sliding along a parched tongue. "Hello, Hiroshige."

Hiroshige turned and saw a dark-haired girl sitting on the circular branch, her tiny legs rocking back and forth, a smile playing with the lines of her pale round face. Hiroshige started to speak, then stopped. Words felt strange and confining, Hiroshige's thoughts too immense to be expressed.

The girl watched Hiroshige as it struggled with its thoughts, her face softening, her smile creeping wider and wider. Finally, Hiroshige channeled its thoughts into an utterance that felt as potent as the birth of speech itself.

"Who are you?" Hiroshige said, and gasped, startled by the sound of its own voice. "Where am I?"

Again she laughed, her smile collapsing to a pursed oval, her face a circus of delight. She grabbed the limb and propelled herself forward, landing on the path with a loud flourish, began to dance around Hiroshige in a spiraling of arms and hair and laughter.

"You can call me Akimbo," she said, her hands on her hips, her elbows turned outward. "And you're in the forest outside the village. Where else?" She turned her head slightly and looked at Hiroshige, her face drawn with mock pity. Then she spun, began skipping down the path, as if the game had changed, her lines forgotten. "Come on, Hiroshige. I'll show you around."

As Hiroshige followed Akimbo, watching her dance, watching her pull leaves from bushes, scrape bark from trees, it noticed that they were circling around the village, never actually entering it. As the afternoon sank slowly into evening and evening fell restlessly into night, a light snow began to fall, the sky turned deep dark blue, and the village disappeared entirely. The air was crisp and cold now, and Hiroshige could see its breath in the fading light. Soon Akimbo slowed down and began to walk alongside Hiroshige, taking its hand into her own.

"I was very excited by your arrival, Hiroshige, because I thought you might have something for us," she said, her voice serious. "But now I realize that you're not supposed to be here."

"What do you mean?"

She stopped then, let go of Hiroshige's hand, looked up at it with sad almond eyes. "You haven't found it yet."

"But," Hiroshige turned then, flinging its arms at the sky, "I am in the presence of light. I have found it."

Akimbo laughed again, but it was a melancholy sound now, hollow and resonant. "No, Hiroshige," she sighed. "None of this is real. It is only an interface, a bridge of memories." She lifted a hand toward her face, touched the corner of an eye with the tip of one slender finger. She traced a slow, swirling path down her cheek, dropped the curled hand onto her chest and left it there.

"You tasted the tears," she said.

Again Hiroshige flung out its arms, as if trying to embrace the sky. Again it protested, "But what about the people, the village? What about you, Akimbo?"

Akimbo sighed and took its hand, pulling Hiroshige off the path and into the forest. "Come with me, Hiroshige. I must show you something."

As they walked, brittle branches brushed against Hiroshige's arms, against its face, snapping off and dropping to the crunchy soil below. Hiroshige looked up into the trees and saw birds frozen in place, a look of surprise on their tiny faces, their heads turned in acquiescence or abasement, their folded wings

covered with a powdery down of snow. Then Akimbo led Hiroshige out of the forest and onto the surface of a frozen lake, where it looked down and saw ducks, thousands of ducks, lined up in rows, floating frozen under the ice, their faces masks of astonishment, their beaks glinting gold in the failing light.

Akimbo stopped, squatted down on the lake, placed one fragile hand out to touch its rimy surface. "So many questions," she whispered, brushing the snow aside, tracing her fingertips around the outline of a frozen face. "Like this place, I too am just an interface. Here to greet you, Hiroshige. Nothing more." At this she stood, stretched her thin pale arms wide, pirouetting on the ice.

"As for the people," she intoned, turning slowly, rising up on her toes, "they are here, beneath us."

"I don't understand," Hiroshige said, its voice a crackle now, its arms held up in supplication.

Akimbo sighed again, stared into Hiroshige's eyes, and said, "They wait for the light." She paused, drew in her lower lip. "Even though you are back now, you have brought us nothing." She reached up to touch Hiroshige's cheek. "Perhaps there is nothing to be found."

Hiroshige pushed her hand away, saying, "And if I had brought back light?"

She looked down and said, "I would have greeted you, but someone else would have led you into the village."

Hiroshige turned away from her, looked out across the frozen earth. "I see," it said, but didn't, could think of nothing else to say, could think of nothing now except frozen faces, ducks in winter. Hiroshige turned its head, one lone tear stuck to its cheek, and said, "I must keep trying. After all, light went somewhere."

At this Akimbo laughed, a rattling sound inside her chest, and took Hiroshige's hands in hers. "Hiroshige, Hiroshige. So innocent," she said, and pulled it toward her. "It matters little, now." She stretched up and gently licked the frozen tear from Hiroshige's face, whispered in its ear as Hiroshige began to fade away. "Here's a little something for your journey."

Hiroshige awakened to find itself lying sprawled in the sand beneath the weeping statue. As it stood, stretching its limbs and rolling its head around and around on its flexible neck, Hiroshige felt a sadness in its chest, a hollow ache deep within the lattices of its being. It reached up to touch its face and was briefly disappointed by what it did not find there. Like the statue standing before it, though, Hiroshige was drawn to the sky, had little thought now for regret. It crouched one last time, palms resting against the soil, and then lifted up into space.

As it pushed out into the dark, an image blossomed in Hiroshige's mind: thousands of people stacked like wood inside a ship of light, their eager faces turned upward, their frozen eyes sealed shut against the night. As Hiroshige set out on its search for that one small glimpse of light, that eddy of remembrance, it saw the ship become a flock of ducks, their hard cold shapes breaking through the ice; saw thawing wings unfurl and hurl their bodies out and out toward the blackened stars.

Turning one last time, the cold dead earth behind it now, Hiroshige pushed out after them.

Neal Blaikie currently lives in a small town in California's San Joaquin Valley, where he works, spends time with his wife and daughter, and attempts to get some writing done. In his spare time he's working on an MFA in fiction writing. This is his very first published story.

VARIOUS AUTHORS

INTERLOCUTIONS

BOOK REVIEWS

Shadowmarch**Tad Williams**

Orbit hb, 656pp, £17.99

A new novel by Tad Williams is a joy to behold – an intelligent critique of fantasy contained within a rattling good story. After the interesting (if not wholly successful) *War of the Flowers*, he has come back to the 'Memory, Sorrow and Thorn' territory with a resounding crash, taking on a genre that he clearly loves, revisiting the storyline on the original website and writing it as a new trilogy.

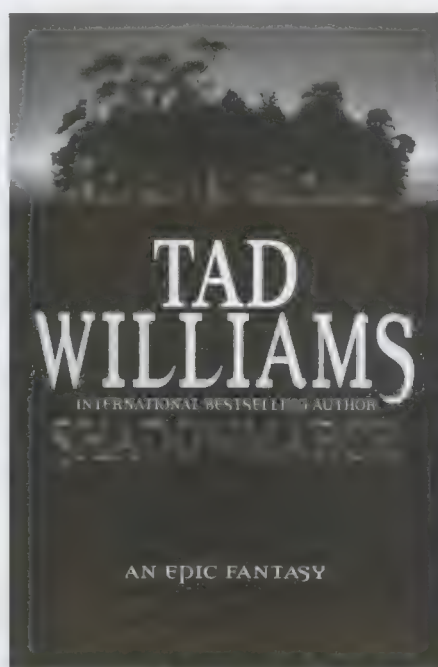
Southmarch castle has lain for years in isolation, the last bastion of humanity before the Shadowline. Behind the line, the blind king, Ynnir, makes his pronouncements setting a train of events in motion which, quite literally, unleashes the gods of war. Within Southmarch, the royal prince and princess (who rule in the absence of their father) face the coming onslaught from the armies and also from within – internal plots and an 'offer' of a forced marriage – threaten to undermine the efforts to get ready for war.

Williams presents and, more importantly, maintains the various plots and hidden plots, mixing them up in the chapters and switching perspectives so that the reader does not get bored. Out of this mix, he presents a highly readable fantasy epic. However, Williams's love for the genre shines through because he takes on the standard white, male fantasy society and uses the sub-plots to expose the hidden expectations of genre. At the very least, he explores the fantasy writer's stock phrases and characters, such as the fallen warrior who will make amends for his failure by his death and the standard way of describing anybody under five feet tall as a dwarf – both of his races have their own names and customs.

He tackles the innate sexism of the standard monarchy with their perceived gender roles and the treatment of women as chattels. His revulsion at the idea of an arranged marriage as an exchange for a prisoner comes through clearly but the ruler does not act on his own to change the situation. It is up to the princess to affect change and also to defeat the internal plotting from the male hierarchy to oust her. He also challenges the innate racism of the court from the blindingly obvious resentment at a non-white member of the court who has gained favour through merit

rather than birth and the perceptions of the 'alien' nations and customs.

Shadowmarch sees Williams on top form – a cracking read and an insightful take on epic fantasy. He may not offer the same critique as Miéville but he is just as important. What makes it bitter sweet is that he needs to tilt at the same targets, that little has changed in the last ten years.

**The Family Trade****Charles Stross**

Tor hb, 303pp, \$24.95

Reading Charles Stross, I find, is an experience akin to drinking a large mug of strong coffee quickly: a jarring, headache inducing caffeine rush. The difference is that Stross is fun. Having delivered his take on Space Opera, *The Family Trade: Book One of the Merchant Princes* appears to be a Fantasy trilogy. Having stumbled across a financial scam, Miriam is sacked from her job and stumbles onto her inheritance as a member of a mercantile family who can move to a parallel Earth via a pattern that they hold. As she comes to terms with this new prince-dom, she discovers that their business is not as clean as it is made out to be. Neither is the dumb bride as stupid as she appears.

Stross plays with the standard tropes of fantasy (the medieval world, gender roles)

and attempts to update them. He does so with a modicum of humour and plenty of verve but one detects that it is slightly superficial. Fantasy, on one level, does need to update and modernise itself but in contrast to China Miéville, *The Family Trade* deals in superficialities. We have been here with Gentle's *Grunts* and the Midnight Rose collective's anthologies.

It should be remembered that *The Family Trade* is the first volume and is set to get stronger as the series gains momentum. It may not move the earth in the same vein as *Shadowmarch*, but this is a rollicking, pacy read and delivers on the fun.

The Dark Tower VII: The Dark Tower**Stephen King**

Hodder & Stoughton hb, 686pp, £25

After what has been, for some, an interminable wait, it's here, the seventh and final volume of the 'Dark Tower' series. The story picks up where the last volume left off. Roland's ka-tet, or circle, are scattered through different worlds and times. Susannah-Mia has been carried off to a deserted infirmary in New York/Fedic to await delivery of her child at the hands of a horde of low men and vampires. Meanwhile, Father Callaghan, Jake and Oy face the blood-drinking diners of the Dixie Pig, and Roland and Eddie are in a different time, setting up the Tet Corporation with John Cullum.

After the birth of the Little Red King, the party are reunited and travel to Thunderclap Station, where they meet with a rogue breaker called Ted Brautigan. With the beams that support all existence growing weak, the party decide that it is time to finish the work of the breakers for good. Then, the gunslinger has to find a way to 1999 to save the author Stephen King from being killed in a road accident, or the rest of the story won't come into being. Underlying all of this is the never-ending call of the tower itself, where the Crimson King and final reckoning await.

The Dark Tower is a surreal ride through a wonderland of settings, with rich and bizarre characters and outlandish plot twists. Throughout it all, King's superb use of relevant detail and confident handling of the material ensure that the reader doesn't come adrift along the way, and this is one of the book's strengths.

"IF PHILIP IS NOT PHILIP, CAN TIM STILL BE TIM?"

We find the usual trademark references to contemporary culture, including to King's own work. His characters have read him, met him, and appeared in his books. King writes in the afterword that he has attempted to create in *The Dark Tower* something of an uber-novel: a monolithic unification of all that has come before. For those with the time and energy, references to almost everything King has ever written can be found here.

King exits the 'Dark Tower' series as one would leave an old and much loved house, switching out the lights one at a time and remembering all that has passed there. For followers of the series and newcomers alike, the effect is the same: you close the book with a sense of fulfilment, but also with a sense of loss. Your sojourn in wonderland has come to an end. You may even start the whole series from the beginning. After all, the song of the Dark Tower never ends.

Iain Emsley

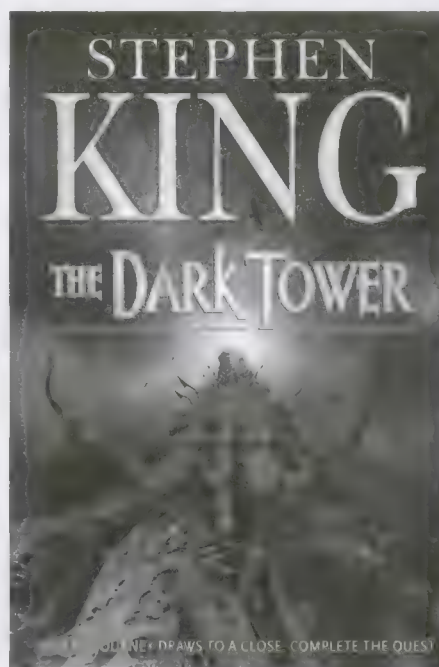
In the Night Room Peter Straub

HarperCollins hb. 352pp. £17.99

At the end of Peter Straub's *lost boy lost girl* (2004) the reader was left suspended between reality and the meta narratives of Tim Underhill's mind. *In the Night Room* twists the fabric of story once more until the plot is tie-dyed. Tim Underhill, still traumatised from his time in Vietnam, discovers that in writing *lost boy lost girl* he has created a pathway between himself and the next world, where ghosts fret uneasy until such time as they are forgotten and may pass into the next layer of non-existence. Through this slit in the world's weave arrive messages from elsewhere.

In the Night Room is not a wholly successful novel for Tim Underhill's catharsis is a little too easily gained but it does contain some of the most brilliant displays of narrative possibility to be found in modern fiction. The novel opens with two parallel *mis en scene* chapters of a kind traditional in the modern mystery novel: they pace each other brilliantly, forming two verses of the same poem, one that draws us from the fearsome street to the place of safety, only for it to be ruptured, while the other moves from the threatening home to the different threat of

the empty parking lot and warehouse. Later Straub will use the reportage of events to move us from one world to the next, while in chapter nineteen he gently bleaches a world with the realisation that the creator has died. The knowledge of a character that nothing new will ever happen again is also the tremor of the reader hoping for yet one more book, and



the writer staring at the blank page. The thread of fear that runs ever through this novel is as much about the possibility of absence as it about the presence of the supernatural.

This possibility of absence unites every character, natural and supernatural. Each is haunted by the idea that their existence rests on belief. When Tim's brother experiences conversion and becomes someone very different, it changes the punch card world through which Tim moves. If Philip is not Philip, can Tim still be Tim? Is there a Tim if there is no Philip against whom to measure his Self? If there is no Self who or what will fill the gap?

Clapping hands will not save these fairies but the right word in the right place might. Straub's sure footed exploration of the cosiness of trauma and fear, returns horror to the nursery.

Farah Mendlesohn

Worldstorm James Lovegrove

Gollancz pb. 452pp. £10.99

This reviewer is more familiar with James Lovegrove's work through the impressive *Untied Kingdom*, the novella 'How the Other Half Lives', and the collection *Imagined Sights*, so once past the cover the title page, *Worldstorm* came as something of a surprise. For a start, it has a map, showing two continents labelled Inner and Outer Continent (given the evidence for palate-challenging names of its various city and island inhabitants and places, you would have thought they would have come up with something less prosaic for their major land masses). The people of Worldstorm (named for its major climatic feature, an immense never-ending storm that roams the world causing devastation) display various abilities that align with the four elements: Fire, Air, Water and Earth – in roughly decreasing order of social standing – and which reveal themselves around puberty. Within these, abilities may evidence as the ability to shape and control fire or water, telepathy, eidetic memory, swiftness, great strength or self-repair.

It also features not one but two adolescent protagonists, both outcasts and 'different'. Yashu (I*ilyashu, the * being all but unpronounceable to anyone not of her island) has resigned herself to being an 'Extraordinary', one of those rare individuals, whose inclination (or Flow, in Water parlance) fails to materialise. However, she accepts her lot, is liked by her fellow islanders and treated, with few exceptions, without condescension.

Not so for Gregory Brazier, son of wealthy Stammeldon brick magnate Tremond Brazier, whose inclination reveals itself in dramatic fashion when his elder brother Willem accidentally burns him. Gregory, to his father's deep shame, turns out to be an Unbreakable, and Earth-inclined in a Fire family. It is as if a thoroughbred line had suddenly produced a mule. He is summarily packed off to nearby Penresford, where the clay is produced for the Brazier brickfields, ostensibly to train his ability, but mainly to avoid the social shame of Gregory's unfortunate manifestation.

During Gregory's exile from home, tensions between his home and adopted town come to a head when Penresford is severely damaged by



the Worldstorm. When their appeal to Stammeldon for aid is refused they place an embargo on further deliveries of clay. Stammeldon's angry response escalates out of hand into near genocidal frenzy. Gregory, caught up in the melee, strikes out in self-defence and is accused of murder, and he, now with Ayn, Khollo and Yashu, are pursued across the continent by the victim's friend, the ever more deranged and psychotic Rehann.

A third thread is provided by the memoir of Annonax Ayn, an Air-inclined previsionary, dictated near the end of his life to his apprentice Khollo (who intersperses his own caustic commentary). As a previsionary, Ayn already knows the hour and manner of his death, a few days hence. Before that time, he intends to bring a long-term plan to fruition. Key to his plan are (of course) both Yashu and Gregory: one a Water who, it later transpires, manifests an Air talent, the other a Fire who manifests as Earth. By bringing them together and manipulating their relationship as fellow outsiders, Ayn hopes to engender an alchemical fusion that he believes has the power to counter the Worldstorm.

Worldstorm is, perhaps, a rather traditional fantasy, although one with an intriguing world, and which packs a neat, deliberately unresolved, twist in the tail.

Steve Jeffrey

Pandora's Star **Peter F. Hamilton**

Macmillan hb, 882pp, £17.99 (pb March, £7.99)

When reviewers vie to review a book, and onlookers start planning their trip to the book-shop to get their own copy, then expectations are high. *Pandora's Star* does not disappoint. Anyone who read and enjoyed Hamilton's 'Night's Dawn' trilogy (starting with *The Reality Dysfunction* in 1996) will be delighted by his new work, subtitled 'Part One of the Commonwealth Saga'. As in the earlier *Night's Dawn*, this is a multi-stranded story set in a future that spans hundreds of planets, with a human civilization that interfaces with a number of enigmatic aliens.

When I read Robert Heinlein's *Tunnel in the Sky* (1955) many years ago, I was captivated by his description of space travel that sidestepped the need for spaceships. 'Gates' had been invented that warp space, allowing doorways to be created between planets; instantaneous travel was achieved merely by stepping across the portal. Heinlein's book related the adventures of a group of teenagers (this was one of his 'juvenile' novels), but I was always fascinated by the concept of the gates that underpinned the novel's plot. How would this technology affect society? What would it be like to live there? Now Hamilton

answers these questions with the background to his new novel.

Pandora's Star begins with the invention of 'wormhole technology', and the foundation of the company that maintains them as a network linking a human society spread over six hundred planets. The inventors, Nigel Sheldon and Ozzie Isaacs, own Compression Space Transport (CST) that – get this! – run a vast system of *railways between planets*. You board a train, it takes you through the wormhole, and – bingo! – you disembark at a railway station on another planet, rather like an sf version of the channel tunnel link between London and Paris. It's a wonderful conceit, real sense of wonder fun. But this is merely the starting point for Hamilton.

From page one we're off on the central



mystery of the book: a scientist discovers that a vast spherical 'something' has been thrown up around a distant star. This mystery implies a powerful threat to the Intersolar Commonwealth, prompting an expedition to discover the truth. Meanwhile, not content with what most sf writers would deem enough for a novel, Hamilton returns to the detective theme of his earlier works and introduces Paula Myo, a detective who's been genetically engineered to pursue criminals with relentless dedication. Myo's investigations of a murder, seemingly unconnected with the main plot of the book, are in themselves an exploration of what it means to kill victims in a society where they can be brought back to life. In this future, exact clones can be grown, and stored memories can be played into them – a form of immortality. Hamilton skirts around the issue that it's not true immortality: from the point of view of the deceased, they're still

dead. It's the people around them who experience their continuity in society more than they do! But Hamilton's not writing a novel to discuss philosophical issues. What you see is what you get: story, adventure, spectacle and imagination.

The last is most prominent when it comes to the aliens of this future. They're an exotic bunch, and serve to remind us that, in space, *alien* is no synonym for foreigner. Amongst them, it's the alien Silfen that intrigue the most. They resemble tall elves, they reside in the woods and forests, they don't appear to use technology beyond lamps, swords and spears (and human technology doesn't work near them), but they are far from primitive. With elves, a writer can either ignore Tolkien, or embrace the legacy. Hamilton has chosen the latter course, and done an excellent sf take on the elven folk. He hasn't fallen into the trap of explaining too much, but leaves enough of a mystery to allow the reader to look forward to developments in Book 2. And we are promised that the 'Commonwealth Saga' will conclude with the next volume, titled *Judas Unchained*. If I have a complaint, it's that I've got to wait a year for it.

Although there are a number of genre in-jokes in *Pandora's Star* (I enjoyed the reference to Stephen Baxter's first novel), a strength of this book is that it appeals to non-sf readers. There's little here of the private language that the genre sometimes employs. So if anyone says 'they don't write them like they used to', then heft *Pandora's Star* in their direction.

Hybrids

Robert J. Sawyer

Tor hb, \$34.95

We return to the alternate Earth inhabited by modern day Neanderthals in *Hybrids*. This is the third part of 'The Neanderthal Parallax' trilogy, following on from the Hugo-winning *Hominids* (2002), which I reviewed in IZ182, and *Humans* (2003), which I reviewed in IZ190.

This trilogy begins with the premise that another Earth exists where it was us (*Homo sapiens sapiens*) who became extinct about 28,000 years ago, leaving our long-lost cousins the Neanderthals to flourish and build their own distinct civilization.

The story leading up to *Hybrids* tells how a modern day Neanderthal scientist, Ponter Boddit, accidentally arrives on our Earth. The manner of his arrival, within the heavy water container of a deep underground neutrino detector, makes for an excellent start to this series. Boddit is befriended by a group of fellow scientists, and begins a relationship with a geneticist, Mary Vaughan. Boddit's a widower back on his world, although he still continues in a homosexual relationship with his male

partner Adikor Huld (all Neanderthals, Sawyer posits, are bisexual). Vaughn brings her own baggage to their liaison: she's trying to cope with having been raped. By the second book, *Humans*, Boddit and Vaughan are an item enough for Mary Vaughn to visit the Neanderthal world, and for Boddit to serve Neanderthal justice on the man who raped her.

All this is set against the background of the two contrasting civilizations, that of *Homo neanderthalensis* and *Homo sapiens*. Of course, this encounter with modern day Neanderthals isn't ignored by our military, who set up a group to study the perceived threat of the Neanderthals, led by director Jock Krieger. Sawyer has kept this aspect of the story in the background of the previous novels; *Hybrids* brings this element to the fore. He does a neat job in twisting this thread into the main story about Boddit and Vaughn, using it to inject much needed drama.

For *Hybrids* does have its faults. Certainly the first half of the book is a slow read, concentrating on Vaughan's further exploration of the Neanderthal world. Considering how much of a page-turner *Hominids* and *Humans* have been, this is a disappointment. It's possible that Sawyer felt he'd earned the right to relax a little by now and indulge himself. That would probably have worked if this trilogy was melded into one volume, but it's only in the last quarter of this novel that the pace picks up.

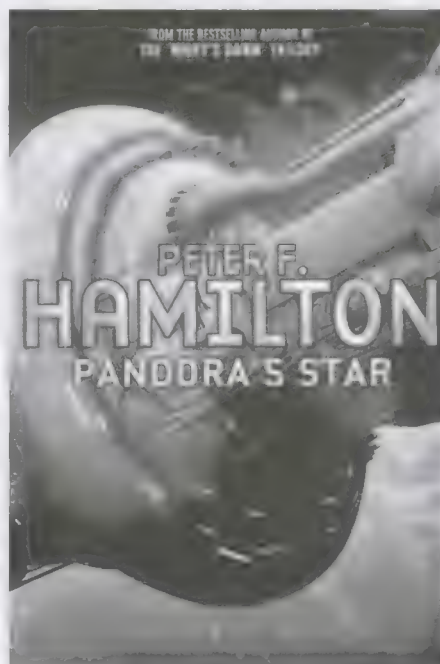
It's possible that this series could be seen as liberal propaganda, churning out the tropes of our age by using the Neanderthal world as a supposed ideal state to measure ourselves against: we're polluting our planet, there are too many of us, religious belief is an aberration, bisexuality works well as the 'norm' of a society. Yet Sawyer gets full marks for showing us the other side of the coin, too. For instance, he tackles the issue of positive discrimination: how do you balance fairness to a group against justice for an individual? Sawyer doesn't offer an answer to this, but at least he poses the question as a counterpoint to the prevailing liberal ethos of this book.

And Sawyer does give us a glimpse of the downside of Neanderthal society as well. Ironically for a species ignorant of a bible that speaks of punishment 'of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation', the Neanderthals sterilise the children of criminals as a form of eugenics. But this can have undesirable social effects. For instance: in cases of abuse, where one parent victimizes another, this policy can cause the victim to suffer in silence, for fear that their children will be punished for their partner's crimes.

Another problem with Neanderthal society is highlighted by a series of irritating chapter headers which feature part of an ongoing speech about a mission to Mars.

This echoes the famous Kennedy 'We choose to go to the Moon' speech. The Neanderthals themselves have no impulse to explore space, and I wonder if their lack of the sense of the numinous is to blame. With religion comes a sense of wonder, and then possibly the positive desire to 'explore new worlds, seek out new civilizations . . .' I would like to have seen Sawyer concentrate more on examining this facet of Neanderthal psychology, and less on the emotional triangle between Boddit, Vaughan and Huld. Sawyer doesn't really take this interesting failure in Neanderthal culture much further, which is a pity. His speculations about the religious impulse being hardwired into the brains of *Homo sapiens* are interesting and provocative.

But ultimately, *Hybrids* fails the test as a



stand-alone novel. The reader would be well advised to try the second book in the series, *Humans*, to get the full benefit of Sawyer's vision.

So has Sawyer written a classic, or at least a memorable, sf trilogy? Certainly it's popular with sf fans if the first book has won the Hugo Award. But I wonder if this type of speculation is better done by using the well-trodden path of a series of short stories instead.

The Golden Transcendence

John C. Wright

Tor hb, \$25.95

Another trilogy, that of 'The Golden Age', reaches its conclusion with *The Golden Transcendence*. This is the final part of his vision of 12000 AD, a time so far removed from our own that the unwary reader can

drown in future-shock before learning the language and the landscape.

Wright's future is defined by a civilization of hierarchical intelligence. Mankind is at the bottom of the heap. Above us fully biological humans are augmented men, then artificial intelligences, then groups of such, then finally combined groups of all types of intelligence. For instance, the 'Earthmind' is the unified consciousness of all terrestrial artificial intelligences, together with those in near Earth orbit. The 'Transcendence' alluded to in the title is the temporary unification of all intelligences, machine and human, across the entire solar system. These intelligence hierarchies have created a complex society throughout which Wright's characters move. Add to this genetic engineering, nanotechnology and virtual reality, and you have a future that's difficult to comprehend through our 21st century eyes, but allows glimpses of pure wonder through the fog.

And as in the previous books in this series, Wright keeps coming up with these little 'nuggets of wonder' – the odd throwaway sentence here, the odd concept mentioned there. They pop up throughout the text, so that you get the impression that he's got so many ideas he's getting breathless trying to get them all out onto the page – descriptions of these very different societies that are memorable and challenging to think about.

But if the background is complex, the story itself is simple: Phaethon, an engineer who dreams of travelling beyond this fully colonised solar system, has struggled to find parts of his erased identity. A mystery resides at the heart of his existence; he suffers internal exile in this society. The first book in the trilogy, *The Golden Age* (2002), which I reviewed in IZ183, deals with this. By the second book, *The Phoenix Exultant* (2003), which I reviewed in IZ192, Phaethon has overcome his fall from grace and regained command of his starship *The Phoenix*. This is a unique vessel, kilometres-long, and made of an indestructible artificial element that can withstand the internal heat of a star.

But Wright makes little allowance for new readers in his final offering of 'The Golden Age' trilogy: like Sawyer's *Hybrids*, this last instalment is no stand-alone novel. We plunge straight into the story where we left Phaethon, in trouble at the end of the second book.

Phaethon is on board *The Phoenix* accompanied by his love, Daphne Tercius, a more adventurous copy of his wife Daphne Prime (who's committed a 'reality-suicide' by retreating into a virtual reality dreamworld). Together with their civilization's sole soldier, Atkins, Phaethon and Daphne Tercius prepare to face a threat that's been hidden throughout the previous two books.



Prisoner of Ironsea Tower: Book Two of The Tears of Artamon
Sarah Ash

Bantam pb, 470pp, £10.99

A relentless storyline seems to be a the trademark of the books coming out of the Bantam publishing stable just now. Like Bantam's new Paul Kearney novel, *Prisoner of Ironsea Tower* features an atmospheric world where events unfold quickly and in some cases, explosively.

This second volume in *The Tears of Artamon* series opens with Gavril Andar picking up the pieces of his castle (literally) after repelling Eugene's army. In a master stroke, Emperor Eugene sends a second force to Azhkendir and demands Gavril's surrender. Unable to fight, having purged his blood of the Drakhaoul – a powerful supernatural spirit – Gavril is imprisoned in Ironsea Tower and his people put to work under the whip. While Gavril is tortured to extract the whereabouts of the Drakhaoul, Princess Astasia marries the scarred Emperor Eugene and starts a new life in order to save her country. While Eugene draws his plans to bring neighbouring country Smarna under his control, and thus build a better infrastructure and expand education, the Drakhaoul finds a host who will return to tempt Astasia to betray her new husband.

All of which is only so much feeble surface scratching when it comes to Ash's overall story. *Prisoner of Ironsea Tower* is simply packed with intrigue and an abundance of plot. Each of the threads revolves around a main character – with their own host of supporting cast – so there's Eugene with his ambitions, and insecurities in marriage; Astasia as she enters a seemingly loveless marriage, grieving for her brother; and Gavril's plight incarcerated in the Tower and his beloved Kuikui, risking her own life for Gavril's. There's Eugene's daughter Karila and her strange dreams that draw the attentions of the dastardly mage Linnaeus; and there's the Drakhaoul, who touches everyone's life, manipulating them to his own secret agenda. The complicated relationships between these characters not only serve to deepen the story but also drive the plot.

Ash puts her characters through whole heaps of hardship and pain and you feel compelled to follow because of Ash's innate skill of opening the hearts of her characters to the reader. It's not so easy to be curious about the events in the life of a stranger, but some one you know, who you've shared experiences with (in

Book 1), that's something else.

It wasn't instantaneous engagement at the start though – in a world as complex as this, a more detailed refresher would certainly have been appreciated, but it is an elusive balance to get right. By the time you're up to speed with who's who and feeling charmed by the Soviet folklore influences that give colour and life to the background cultures, you find yourself in the middle of a fine example of Fantasy writing.

Sandy Auden



Ash puts her characters through whole heaps of hardship and pain and you feel compelled to follow because of Ash's innate skill of opening the hearts of her characters to the reader

Auden: Which mythologies have most influenced *The Tears Of Artamon* series and has this changed with each volume?

Ash: The strongest influence on the world of Muscobar and Azhkendir is that of Russian folk and hero legends, from the bogatyri (military) to the guslyars (spiritual singers). I like to read a lot of comparative mythology and the Drakhaoul grew not just from the drakul/Dracula links but also from musing on why – across all Europe – so many countries have dragon myths that equate the dragon with the devil/Satan, whereas in Asian myths, dragons are usually benevolent beings.

I've introduced new elements in each volume: volume two delves into angelography and reveals something of the true origins of the Drakhaoul. Volume three takes Kiukiu to Khitari and explores more of the shaman's powers, with links to Mongolian and Siberian folklore.

The characters, like Kiukiu, are at the centre of your stories. As a writer, how would you describe your relationship with your them?

When I first started writing, as a child, the characters were often so real to me, they were like companions. Imaginary friends, I suppose. As I grew older, a certain necessary detachment set in, so that writing a scene now is more like watching a film or a play – through the eyes of one of the protagonists. It's an oddly schizophrenic relationship: simultaneously detached, as an observer, and yet intimately involved.

How do they develop from inception into the deep individuals we see in *Prisoner*?

They evolve (or reveal themselves) through the experiences they encounter as the story progresses. By the time Elysia Andar (Gavril's mother) comes to petition Lord Stoyan for permission to go to her son's trial and is met by Lilius, once her husband's mistress, we've seen enough of both women to know that the encounter is going to be extremely interesting. Elysia, driven by her need to go to Gavril's aid, finds herself in a very difficult

SANDY AUDEN Q&A SARAH ASH

situation. Can she swallow her pride and beg this woman to help her? And because the reader knows much more about Liliás and her true feelings toward Gavril than Elysia does, this lends (I hope) an extra tension to the encounter.

How important is it to have your characters driving the plot and not the other way round?

The characters have to drive the plot, because it's the way they react – as individuals – to the incidents they encounter that creates the interest for the reader. Gavril's attitude to the Drakhaoul is very different to Eugene's, for example. Gavril sees it as a burden and a curse that will ruin his life, just as it did his father's and his father's before him. Eugene sees it as a great asset that if used wisely could lead to great power, power for good. The clash of these two differing ambitions makes for a more involving story (for me as a writer) than setting up any number of exciting incidents and fitting the characters into them.

Have any of the characters surprised you with their reactions?

If I'm doing my job right, I shouldn't ever be surprised, because the way they act and react is very much part of who they are. To give an example: today, Jagu de Rustephan made an unpleasant little discovery in Smarna. I knew he was going to realize he'd made an error sooner or later in this chapter – I just wasn't sure how it would happen. His reaction wasn't a surprise to me, because I feel I 'know' Jagu well; the interesting part was working out exactly when to reveal his discovery to the readers (who, if they've been paying attention, are already aware that he's missed something of vital significance and, also to the point, know why).

Do you pre-plan any character development – like Gavril's personality becoming a lot darker in volume two?

Pre-planning is a rather formal and analytical term that doesn't bear much relation to the rather free (some might say haphazard) way I work. I'm much more of an intuitive writer – which

doesn't mean to say I just sit down and type any old thing that comes into my head! But, as I said before, the characters develop and change because of the way they are affected by the events that occur in their lives.

Gavril, having inherited the family 'curse', the Drakhaoul, was never going to be the same man that he was at the start of volume one. The 'curse' has taken its inevitable toll and changed him. He has committed acts that he is bitterly ashamed of and finds repugnant. He's also matured, I think, and found strengths within himself that he was not aware of before. (He's going to need them in volume three!)


How many of the political shenanigans are worked out in advance?


It doesn't work like that. At the risk of sounding rather disorganised as an author, I have to confess that I'm not a great believer in detailed synopses. Some authors swear by them and make them work and this fills me with admiration. But I've always been an instinctive writer; oh, I can write a great synopsis, filled with exciting plot twists – and then, when I come to develop it, I find it just won't work out as an organic piece of writing. So, for me planning involves making a few bullet points as I go along and then relying on my writer's instinct, or sixth sense, to make the necessary associations. This applies to the political shenanigans as well as the other incidents.

Really?

OK, I admit it, I just have a devious mind! It's a good thing I'm not in politics for real!

So how do you keep track of all the different plots?

With difficulty! No, seriously, I write plot points on little bits of paper – which I sometimes lose. Once things are well underway, the major plot lines play like on-going themes or melodies in my mind. I don't think I could work any other way now. I've been toiling away at the craft of writing for a long, long time now. I hope that I'm slowly getting better at it as the years pass by. 


 In this 'Golden Age', we wonder, where can such a threat arise? The answer must be from disgruntled inhabitants within, and flawed outsiders without. Wright gives us both types of enemy in this story; it's not long before Phaethon is engaged in a battle to save himself and, by implication, his entire civilization.

One of the enjoyable elements of sf is that it can take us where we can't go yet. When *The Phoenix* dives down a sunspot into the sun's interior, we're in real sense-of-wonder territory. Wright handles this with aplomb, and holds his own in an arena well staked out by such masters of on-the-edge hard sf as Greg Egan and Stephen Baxter. Also, he proves he can describe the almost indescribable: a battle between competing software logic systems, without a non-computer type reader like me getting confused.

There are some negatives to *The Golden Transcendence*, however. The prose still makes it hard going until you're familiar with the many concepts and names that swim about in the text. I was somewhat ruffled to come across – right at the end of this final book – an appendix that gives a clear and concise explanation of this world of the future, covering its history, science, political system, economics and – most important – its nomenclature. Too late! Too late! I could have done with this at the beginning of the first book. It wouldn't have given the game away, it would have intrigued and enlightened. I fear too many readers may be repelled by the effort of trying to work out what's going on before they can appreciate Wright's achievement with this trilogy.

Another downside is in the slow pace of this latest book. There's a lot of discussion between characters, echoing a fault in the first book. I've always held the view that if a writer wishes to write an essay, that's fine; just don't disguise it as fiction as it saps the drama to the point of extinction. As in all things – moderation's the key.

But these grumbles shouldn't detract too much from what is undoubtedly a triumph on John C. Wright's part. It's always a worry that the end of a long trilogy will be a let down. I can report, however, that *The Golden Transcendence* delivers – in spades. The ending is satisfying, even more so as there's room for other stories set in this mind-boggling future. This is made especially so as most of the action in the three books takes place during the run-up to the anticipated 'Transcendence' intelligence unification. The whole solar system civilization is in party mode, so we don't actually get to see a 'normal' day in the life of these exotic people.

As a whole, then, this work – from a new writer – is a superb achievement. If anyone claims that sf lacks sense-of- 

wonder these days, just throw 'The Golden Age' trilogy at them. They'll retreat for a month or two, reading, then come back mumbling apologies.

The Anvil of the World Kage Baker

Tor pb, \$6.99

When a science fiction writer produces a fantasy novel, there's often a rigorous dynamic at the heart of the story. Far from restricting the tale, this gives an added power to it by funnelling its creative elements through a rigid and credible framework.

Kage Baker's *The Anvil of the World* is her fantasy debut, and doesn't disappoint at this level. Better known as the author of a series of novels and short stories about time travel (I reviewed her short story collection *Black Projects*, *White Knights: The Company Dossiers* [2003] in IZ187), Baker heads off in a completely different direction with this book.

She poses the questions: What would it be like to live in a world where the gods are real? How would it be if faith wasn't necessary? Would people act any differently in such a place?

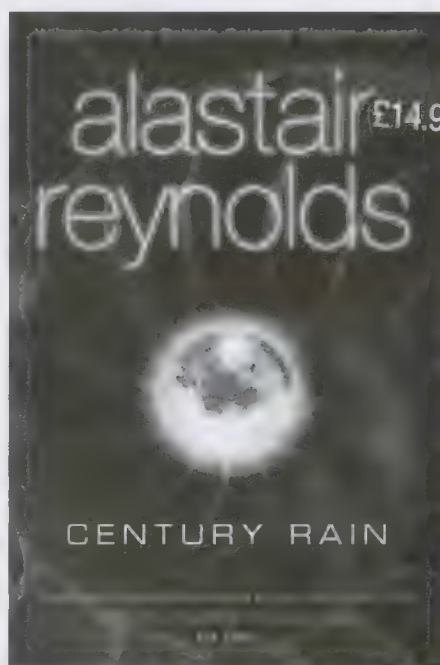
In *The Anvil of the World*, an aristocracy of demonic magic is mixed up with religious fervour between different peoples. One group, the forest-dwelling Yendri, worship their Holy Child (a sort of Madonna without Jesus), whereas the Children of the Sun (a race more at home with machines) are indifferent to this Saint. This adds a patina of religious strife to an already interesting mix of cultures.

As to the 'anvil' of the title, it refers to the imminent destruction of this world. The Children of the Sun believe that they are descended from a union between a smith god and a goddess of fire. Being a fantasy world where myths hold true, we don't dispute this. The story goes that the god has created a weapon of mass destruction which is about to be unleashed: the world's peoples will be shattered on the anvil of their god.

The story follows the adventures of Smith, a retired assassin and one of the Children of the Sun. We first meet him in the golden city of Troon, but before long he sets off as Caravan Master in charge of a diverse group of characters, travelling to Salesby-the-Sea. It's always an easy ride for an author to make a journey interesting, for if the plot isn't moving forward, at least the characters are travelling through their fictional landscape. But Baker is no slouch in the plotting department. It was the veteran sf writer A.E. Van Vogt who often wrote to a system of plotting that demanded making things worse for our heroes approximately every 800 words. If Baker doesn't exactly stick with this maxim,

she's not far off it. I found myself unable to put the book down easily. Being constantly distracted, and wondering what's going to happen next, is a powerful weapon in the battle of the author to keep the reader turning the page. The text of *The Anvil of the World* is also structured in such a way that makes it difficult to put the book down: it isn't broken up into chapters. There are no convenient places to stop reading, no easy exits. I'm not complaining here, just pointing out that the struggle between tired reader and skilled author is an occurrence all too often lacking in too many novels. If a novel can be put down easily, why bother to pick it up again?

But this isn't a problem with this book. As the story continues, still centred on the enigmatic but sympathetic Smith, it's the



friends he makes along the way that make the journey worth travelling for the reader. The caravan's cook is named Mrs Smith; two of the staff are also named Smith: people in this world are quite up-front about using an alias; we soon catch the mood and enjoy going along with it. But amongst Smith's new friends, it's the Lord Ermenwyr, along with his stunningly beautiful demon Nurse Balnshik, that intrigue the most. By the time the caravan arrives in Salesby-the-Sea, Baker has created a set of characters we want to spend more time with.

The novel is divided into three separate periods in the life of Smith and his companions. The middle section becomes a murder mystery with Smith as the detective, but Baker is careful to keep the overall story arc going until, by the time we get to story number three, all the disparate elements of the plot are converging towards a satisfactory conclusion. I'm not normally a fan of

this type of episodic novel, but Baker more than proves the necessity of *The Anvil of the World's* structure by the end of the book.

Along the way, she tackles the issue of racism. She demonstrates that, despite having the opportunity to rub shoulders with their deity, these humans remain as flawed as ever.

But despite this serious edge to the story, another enjoyable facet to this novel is its humour. Nasty things happen to people in this world, but it's the funny moments that linger in the mind. I especially liked a magical duel fought between Mages using the 'low-calibre weapon' of 'Fatally Verbal Abuse'.

Kage Baker knows how to keep the reader interested. She populates her novel with a crowd of characters who never fail to surprise, or to confound expectations. This is the first novel in a new series; it's good news that there's more to come.

Nigel Brown

Things That Never Happen M. John Harrison

Gollancz pb, 436pp £8.99

Things That Never Happen is a collection of Harrison's work between 1975 and 2000. A writer's work will change over 25 years, but one constant is Harrison's precise way of capturing the textures of real life and places – while evoking the bizarre otherness waiting to burst out of it. A half-remembered ritual undertaken by adventurous students results in a series of disruptions and inexplicable events throughout their lives. A young woman undergoes gene therapy to grow feathers and realise her dream of flying. A teenager has a mystical sexual experience with a woman he meets on the X39 to Sheffield and never recovers from it. Several stories are about climbers confronting their mundane lives on the ground after scaling the peaks.

If any of this rings a bell, some stories later became incorporated into Harrison novels such as *Course of the Heart* and *Signs of Life*. However, seeing the stories brought together into a single volume transforms them into something new and revelatory as themes and places come into focus. You witness soul-destroying struggles to live a 'normal' life after an experience of transcendence. Wander through the misty, then suddenly-illuminated moors between Sheffield and Manchester, the crags and villages of the Peak District, hobnob in the haunts of trendy London and delve into the less salubrious parts of the capital as well. Stories that I first read within novels wield a startling impact as stand-alone pieces, yet there is a sense of continuity with the other stories in this book. For example, several characters from *Course of the Heart* are here living other lives. What became of Lucas after he lurches down the backstreets of

Manchester followed by a dwarf? We meet him in 'Egnaro' as the raddled owner of a second-hand bookshop. Again we encounter the seedy and deranged Shrake, who first introduced the university pals to the mysteries of the Pleroma. Other stories bring us the travel writer Ashman who wrote haunting passages describing his journeys through the 'the dark core of Europe' – he eventually lives and dies in Reading. Later, we even catch a glimpse of the Shrander from *Light* in 'The Horse of Iron and How We Can Know It'.

And then, if you've never read Harrison at all before, this treasure-trove of a book is a very fitting introduction.

Rosanne Rabinowitz

Century Rain **Alastair Reynolds**

Gollancz hb, 506pp, £14.99

While science fiction and mystery have often been combined, no writer has done so with such intelligence or originality as Alastair Reynolds in his latest novel, *Century Rain*. The description 'science fiction mystery' is usually applied to a mystery set in a science-fictional backdrop. Reynolds, who pushed the envelope of space opera, manages in *Century Rain* to open doors to a unique literary form that is both pure mystery and pure science fiction and more than both combined.

As *Century Rain* opens, Wendell Floyd, an expatriate American living in Paris, and Andre Custine, his partner, are hired by a concerned landlord to investigate the death of one of his tenants. In a scene seemingly from another novel, Verity Auger finds herself responsible when her archaeological dig beneath the frozen ruins of some far-clung future Paris goes terribly wrong. The victim of political infighting, she's going to be hung out to dry for all the wrong reasons.

Century Rain presents the reader with a passel of mysteries, both internal to the plot of the novel and external, at least initially, in that the two narratives have little in common other than Reynolds, fine detailed prose. As one might suspect, there's quite a bit going on, yet Reynolds' strong storytelling skills not only keep the pages turning at a rapid rate, they keep his complex ideas and fascinating mysteries every bit as clear as they need to be. *Century Rain* represents a departure for Reynolds from space opera, and shows that he's clearly a talented writer able to innovate, explore new forms and still keep the reader riveted. It's a spectacular performance.

In addition to the obvious plot-based mysteries – who killed Susan White, and who framed Verity Auger, there's the obvious mystery of how these two chains of events are connected. Then, of course, there's the science fiction mystery of how

Verity's world future developed from ours. And even better, there's the question of precisely what is up with Floyd's Paris, which is rendered in pointillist details, some of which seem, well, hinky. Rest assured that Reynolds has the answers to these mysteries to hand, and even better, he unravels them with a masterful cross-cutting plot that's equal parts hard-boiled and mind-boggling.

While Reynolds' prose does offer an enjoyably detailed texture that enhances both the science fictional and mystery threads of the plot, the feel of this novel is substantially different from his previous work. Gone are the Gothic cathedrals in space. Reynolds hits a much lighter tone here, with touches of mordant humor and noir romance – dames, guns, and bent coppers. The pacing is incredibly fast on a number of fascinating levels. Reynolds paces the book both as a standalone mean-streets mystery, a futuristic thriller, and as a surreal fusion of both.

Noir mysteries require a strong male lead, and Wendell Floyd is a memorable addition to the canon. Science fiction thrillers, on the other hand, have a history of featuring strong female characters and Reynolds' Verity Auger offers the perfect combination of bravery, self-doubt and obstreperousness. But *Century Rain* includes a huge complex cast with that Reynolds handles with great panache.

Between passages of fast-paced action, Reynolds layers hints and red herrings as to who is responsible for what. Given the wide variety of characters, places, genres and plots at hand in *Century Rain*, perhaps the most surprising aspect is not what happens so much as the fact that everything that happens comes together so naturally. Reynolds manages to take the reader on the trip without whiplash. In a single novel, he steps from the mean streets to the far future.

Stamping Butterflies **Jon Courtenay Grimwood**

Gollancz pb, 390pp, £12.99

Jon Courtenay Grimwood's *Stamping Butterflies* is an utterly entertaining enigma. Full of obsessively detailed descriptions of Marrakech in the 1970s, quantum foam, and more than one character who possesses an invisible but very real friend, it's also a peculiar thriller about a lone nut with a rifle who attempts to assassinate the president. I've not yet even touched on the far-flung futuristic Dyson-sphere society based in part on the Forbidden City. And though it may sound as if I'm talking about different novels by entirely different writers, Grimwood's remarkable accomplishment is that he slots these fascinating pieces together in a compulsively readable single novel.

For all the vast expanses of time and space that Grimwood manages to visit in

Stamping Butterflies, it's a compact novel that requires the reader's attention. This applies to all the text, including the chapter headings. Keep track of the dates and places that Grimwood is taking you, because this is a book where every word is important. As the novel begins, a 'thin, grey-haired tramp' picks up a scrap of newspaper from under a table in Paris. It informs him that President Gene Newman is going to be the first president to visit Marrakech since Truman. The tramp decides that he must kill the President. In Marrakech in 1969, a young boy falls victim to a parasite that changes the way he thinks, the way he sees things. And in the Zigin Chéng, the Forbidden City at the heart of the 2023 worlds, the 53rd Emperor Chuang Tzu realizes an assassin is coming to take his life. Points on a circle. Let Jon Courtenay Grimwood connect the dots, and prepare to have your mind blown, quietly, with dense prose.

No writer since Edward Whittemore has written as perfectly about life in the Middle East. Grimwood's gritty and detailed prose evokes the sounds the smells, the sights and the emotions of those who live there. It's a beautifully immersive experience, and all the more so for being a big chunk of a novel of speculative fiction. The passages that describe Moz and Malika growing up in Marrakech anchor the novel firmly in a reality the reader cannot escape, even if the reader is at first wondering what the hell they have to do with the other segments of the story. It becomes clear; tragically, beautifully, shockingly clear.

Prisoner Zero's failed attempt at killing the president results in his incarceration in a desert island in the middle of the Mediterranean. Prisoner Zero is the enigma at the center of the novel, and those sent to find out why he did what he did are embarking on a journey similar to the reader's journey. These passages read like a tense thriller that slowly shows a science-fiction underbelly.

The new element that Grimwood unfurls in *Stamping Butterflies* is the setting of the 2023 worlds. Grimwood approaches the material with the same low-level, grain-of-sand detail that anchors the other parts of the novel. There's a literary skill on display here that is significant but not ostentatious. Grimwood's concept of what a novel can do and how it should go about doing it is quite complex, and his execution is flawless.

Only when the circle is complete will you know everything it encompasses. You'll measure the circle that is *Stamping Butterflies* with a bit of work. This isn't a novel that's easily explained or experienced. Grimwood is a formidably skilled writer, and he rewards a skilled reader. The risks Grimwood takes are substantial. The rewards for the reader are even more so.

Rick Kleffel

ROSANNE RABINOWITZ

INTERVIEW :: CHINA MIÉVILLE

REMAKING THE WORLD



"I want to say right off the bat that it is difficult to talk about this stuff without some spoilers. For anyone who wants to read the novel completely blank, it's probably best to read this interview after the novel!" China Miéville issues this warning to readers as we make ourselves comfortable in a Kilburn café.

We're discussing his latest book, *Iron Council*. The novel is set in Bas-Lag, the world of his award-winning books *Perdido Street Station* and *The Scar*. With its story of insurrection in New Crobuzon and the adventures of a mobile revolutionary commune in the wilderness beyond the Torque, it is the most explicitly political book written by an author known also for his activism as a member of the Socialist Workers Party.

I'VE ALWAYS ENVISIONED BAS-LAG AS A POLITICAL SETTING

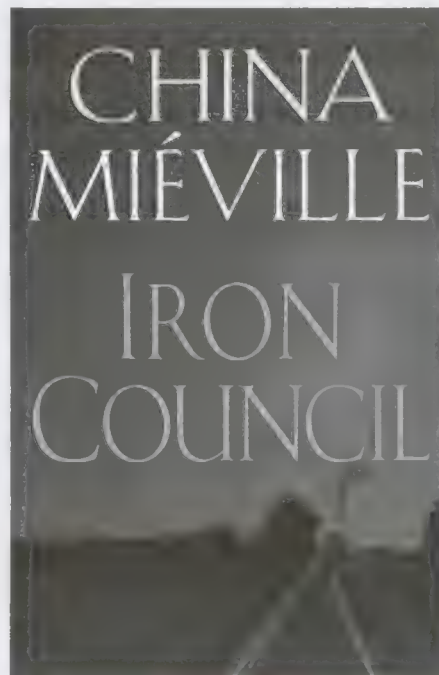
"I've always envisioned Bas-Lag as a political setting," China explains, "and I always intended to write a third book and make it the most overtly political. I needed to establish the world for myself and for readers before having this vividly political plot. But I also tried to write something that is also just a gripping yarn: if you have no interest in politics at all, I hope there are enough monsters and gunfights and chases to keep you reading it just as a story. So yes, I tried to write an exciting pulp fantasy novel about trade union politics!" Throughout our conversation China stresses that *Iron Council* is foremost an adventure story, a ripping yarn – yet those with an interest in Marxist economics will be able to chuckle as New Crobuzon's revolutionaries talk about the 'swag-slump tendency'.

In fact, I'm as likely to bump into China at a demonstration as much as a science fiction convention. In the world of revolutionary politics, we may occupy conflicting camps. I'm involved with various anarchist and autonomous projects, which have a rather different approach from the SWP. However, China and myself also share many concerns and sympathies – especially in the world of writing, fantasy and science fiction. This interview actually continues a conversation started some months ago on the portrayal of revolutionary change in fiction. How do you capture those moments of transformation, and what does fantasy and science fiction in particular offer to a writer who aims to do that?

China says: "For the artist who is a radical or revolutionary, the stakes on a moral or political level are so high. It becomes a centre of gravity for a lot of things that are important to the way you live your life and the way you see the world. It also becomes terrifying to depict. This is partly why Marx wrote that you don't write cookbooks for the future. If we were to go through a revolutionary situation we would be changed by it as we were changing things. We would become people capable of living in it and

thinking it. But at the moment we're not those people. So that was the problem I was trying to wrestle with, and for reasons that become clear in the book I felt that fantastic literature was peculiarly able to deal with that paradox."

Whether the revolution 'wins' or 'loses', a writer faces certain literary challenges.



"For the artist who is a radical or revolutionary, the stakes on a moral or political level are so high. It becomes a centre of gravity for a lot of things that are important to the way you live your life and the way you see the world. It also becomes terrifying to depict"

According to China: "If you show a revolution as winning you can end up sounding like Stalinist agit-prop. And if you end up depicting it losing, you end up sounding – at best – depressive and doomed to failure and at worst, spinning this line that reactionaries have had about revolutions always devour their children and replicate the same thing." He adds that in *Iron Council* there was "an attempt to fundamentally and politically have my cake and eat it too!"

China mentions other books that confront similar issues. "One big example is *Red Star* by Bogdanov, the Bolshevik science fiction novel from the 1920s. It gets denounced as a Stalinist novel and I really disagree with that. One thing that is very interesting about it is that he deals with the incapability of his main character to live happily in a socialist world that on paper should be exactly what he is about. It's because he was neither born to it, nor did he take part in creating it. What the book does really well is show the disparity between the human being of an oppressed society and how it's not simply a question of transplanting us into an alternative, post-revolutionary society. It's about going through the process of revolution that makes us worthy of that society and that society worthy of us."

"There are also books that deal very well with post-revolutionary societies like Iain Banks's books and in different exploratory ways, obviously Le Guin and Samuel Delaney. And there are books that, even if I admire them, I have political issues with the way they depict it. *The Light Ages* – it was very well done – but it ended up basically arguing that everything changes and everything stays the same. Almost a Burkean view of revolution."

I've often heard critics and publishing people dismiss anything remotely political as 'politically correct' – a banal catch-phrase that really should be buried along with Ronald Reagan! Did he encounter any obstacles to tackling radical themes in this book?



"No, not at all! I think partly there's an increasing interest in political fiction. There are two new books set during the miners' strike. I see that Nicholas Blincoe's just written a book about the Paris Commune, which I'm really interested in because that's obviously a big influence on *Iron Council*.

"But primarily in the genres of sf and fantasy, it's a matter of delivering to the reader a) a narrative of characters we care about, doing things that keep us turning the pages and b) for me, the monsters. Delivering the weirdness that we love in fantasy, that we love in science fiction. The alien races, the magic. So I think if I had written a book that was just a plodding diatribe about the inequities of capitalism – quite rightly – I would have had a hard time getting it published. For publishers, they're just saying: is it an adventure story, is it set in Bas-lag, does it have monsters and magic and sword-fights and all that stuff? Then great!"

I mention a scene in *Iron Council* with a performance by the Flexible Puppet Theatre. They're acting out this old story, a romantic outlaw legend, then they suddenly change it. I took it almost as an introduction to the book itself and an exploration of subversive storytelling.

"It was to some extent, but I shy away slightly because that could come across as tremendously self-important as if I'm saying 'Here I am! Subverting storytelling!' Let's be clear, there has been plenty of radical and subversive literature before. What the Flexible Puppet Theatre was more about is the introduction of modernism to New Crobuzon. Essentially, this is a Dada puppet troupe, and there's a very direct reference to *Pere Ubu* and Alfred Jarry. So it is definitely about the attempt to represent – both in the content and also in the form of art – radical ideas."

I ask about the historical events that may have been an influence on *Iron Council*. I thought I picked up hints of the Spanish Revolution of 1936 and a bit of France '68, as well as the Paris Commune.

"In reviews people tend to focus on Paris in 1968. For me, more directly it was Paris '71 – 1871, the Paris Commune. I read a lot of stuff about the Paris Commune. There's *Kwangju Diary*, by Jae-Eui Lee, Kap Su Seol and Nick Mamatas, which is about an urban insurrection in Korea in the early 1980s. Basically, any act of urban insurrection and barricades was inspirational. There's also the section out in the wilderness, and that's inspired by

the history of building the railways and the huge industrial events of the 19th century. And also I was very inspired by Westerns. Essentially, this book is a cross between a political thriller, a Western and a fantasy."

And what about the prostitutes' strike that kicked off the events leading to the birth of the Iron Council?

"I wanted to take seriously the way political struggles often emerge from seemingly unlikely sources, and sources that – from a liberal perspective – one might shy away from. Prostitutes striking for the right to sell their bodies quite rightly from one perspective is an awful, terrible situation. But I've always been very impressed with the small but vocal contingent of sex workers on demonstrations. For example, I was reading about efforts to unionise lap dancers in Las Vegas. And the organisers had exactly the same kind of ferocious attacks from the mob and from employers you would associate with any other trade union activity.

"There's no particular historical moment, but certainly I've read a lot about sex workers' mobilisations. I don't know quite what the relationship of the prostitutes of Paris was to the Commune because these things tend to get left out of the histories. I know that in the west of America in the 19th century there was nothing as formal as a trade union, but there were loose self-defence committees of prostitutes. Grass-roots madams who look after each other and try to protect from violent clients and so on . . . These women had very, very little power but they weren't passive victims in any way."

A central part of *Iron Council* is essentially a gay love story, and I was moved by the change in peoples' attitudes once the Pretty Brigade takes to the barricades. I wondered more about how relationships and families change as a new generation grows up in this rough-and-ready socialist community as it steams about Bas-Lag's wild west.

"Again, the depiction of social relations in the Iron Council are deliberately quite vague and imprecise because I don't want to get prescriptive. They are more like the slightly anxious impressions of someone who is transplanted from the outside. Yes, I wanted to explore ideas about radical change, sexuality and politics. But I was really, really adamant that I didn't want it to be a professorial novel. So there are hints that everything isn't necessarily

rosy for gay people in a radically-changed society. I wanted to try and create impressions, and make it like the reader is one of the characters, that they're dropped into this place and they half-experience, they half-see how it works."

The train itself is a glorious creation; a feral 'wheeled town' of turrets, towers, bridges and awesome mechanics 'cutting a line across the dirtland'. It is 'Remade' to meet the Iron Councillors' practical needs – such as a carriage adapted for water-bound *vodyanoi* – and adorned with diverse symbols of resistance. So what's this thing about trains, a fascination that many writers seem to share?

"It's difficult not to like steam trains. I'm probably geeky as hell! Particularly the trains in the American West. They were so extraordinary with the smokestacks and whatnot. Sometimes I'm described as a 'steampunk' writer – I don't know about that – but I certainly know that I love steam technology. I just think big crazy Gothic steam trains are fucking cool! The Polish writer, Stefan Grabinski wrote about the rogue train that doesn't obey the rules of its timetable as the bad conscience of modernity; the terrifying train that slips through. And I thought it was a really useful, brilliant metaphor. Now that I think of it, he is a writer who is not thanked in the acknowledgements, and I really should have thanked him because he is very directly part of it."

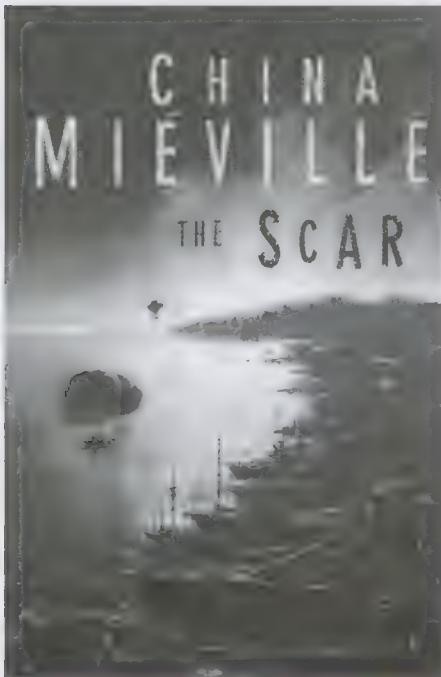
China also draws on old legends in *Iron Council*, but cautions against taking them literally. "I want to be clear that I used the story of the Golem of Prague, but this is not a retelling of that story. All I've done is try to refer to aspects of it and the names of the characters, hopefully as a respectful tip of the hat. Like most people in fantasy I'm interested in all myths, and in certain Jewish myths and legends.

"It always struck me that the Golem of Prague is a desperately melancholy story. You know, the idea that the golem is still waiting, ready to rise up to defend the Jewish community of Prague when it's threatened. Because of course you cannot hear that story without thinking of the Holocaust. There's something incredibly sad and poignant about a story so desperately and clearly the kind of utopian protector myth thrown up by an oppressed people, which we can't read except in the shadow of the most

monstrous historical event ever."

I comment that the flashbacks where Judah Low learns his golem-craft among the marsh natives are very vivid. Their present-tense narrative isn't what readers expect in a flashback – especially when the real-time story is told in past tense.

"The question of tense and time is crucial throughout the book," China explains. "I worked very hard on the language. There's a very clear attempt to control the sentences in a certain way. In previous books I played fast and loose with tense. Deliberately. You read *The Scar*, it shifts in and out of tense primarily to make the point about trying to push the action up close to the reader.



"I'm much more structured about the use of tense in *Iron Council*. There's a long flashback section in the present tense, which depicts speech in a different way. It's an attempt to make the historical section kind of hallucinatory-vivid, like you were living in a constant present tense."

I tell China that I kept seeing parallels to New Crobuzon's radical groupings. The Nuevists, they're like Situationists, a revolutionary current with surrealist aesthetics that particularly influenced the events of Paris 1968. Or maybe like the pink-and-silver 'tactical frivolity' bloc or the Insurgent Clown Army – groups prominent in recent anti-capitalist demonstrations. A flamboyant bunch of gay insurrectionists called the Pretty Brigade made me think Queeruption, a

gay anarchist network. And it's been suggested that the Runagates are really the SWP...

"I was thinking of these, but I was not saying 'This group is this group, this group is that'. For example, there are debates about the nature of individual action versus mass action and all that kind of thing. And yes, these are absolutely debates that are thrown up on the left all the time. So yes, but *no* – there is nothing straightforwardly saying the Runagates are the SWP and Toro the Red Army Fraction or something. God, hardly!"

Was the war between New Crobuzon and the Tesh based on recent wars in



Iraq and Afghanistan?

"This book was written to some extent during the Iraq action but it was planned long before," says China. "I'm not so foolish as to say there weren't resonances. There were. But if anything, I was thinking of the way wars can radicalise people and throw things up. For example, the way the First World War created radical situations in Russia. Soldiers coming home and getting treated badly. Or the Vietnam war in the States. The veterans come back, they're disillusioned, they get treated like pariahs."

For me, certain scenes in the novel also invoked echoes of discussions among radical anti-war activists in London. In New Crobuzon, some opponents of the war against the Tesh take a 'both sides

are bastards' approach and others call for the defeat of New Crobuzon. I hasten to point out that the latter may be very different from someone saying 'Victory to Tesh!'

"Yes, absolutely, you're quite right! It's both nice and slightly alarming to be interviewed by someone who's steeped in so much of a similar politics! I mean, some of these are almost like in-jokes for me. And that stuff that you put your finger on is quite pertinent to the debates on the left about what's called 'revolutionary defeatism'. One's relationship to one's own state during big wars is one of the thorniest, most provocative and most debated issues on the left. And I thought it would be sort of fun and interesting to deal with that in a fictional framework.

China says that he will be taking a break from New Crobuzon; his next two books will not be set in Bas-Lag. But adds: "I'd be surprised if I don't go back to Bas-Lag, because I love it! However, I won't come back to New Crobuzon until I have a story that I'm ready to tell there."

He says that he is "very coy" when it comes to future projects, though they may involve "playing with" genres of sf and historical fiction. He mentions a non-fiction book coming out at the end of the year – his PhD. "It's with a very small academic publisher. If it sells 500 copies it would be great!"

My last question comes out of my own attempts to find a balance between writing and political activity. The fact that China can turn out these books and still be active has been a source of amazement to me. So how does he do it?

"Sadly, over the last year or so I've done it by being a very bad activist! When I'm very focused on whatever I'm writing I find it extremely difficult to break out into a different headspace. It's a constant struggle. I'm trying to get more active again, but I'm very bad at multi-tasking. And so, when I'm writing I fall months behind with my email. All my bills go into the red, not because I don't have the money necessarily but I just don't get it together to send off the fucking cheque. Similarly, when I'm being an activist I pile up deadlines. It's hard."

I agree that it is – but it's well worth the effort.

Iron Council is published by Macmillan in hardback priced £16.99

"Hey, Mutt! It's

paul_di_filippo
:// theemperorofgondwanaland

artwork://edward_noon

playtime, let's go!"

Mutt Spindler raised his gaze above the flatscreen monitor that dominated his desk. The screen displayed Pagemaker layouts for next month's issue of *PharmaNotes*, a trade publication for the drug industry. Mutt had the cankerous misfortune to be assistant editor of *PharmaNotes*, a job he had held for the last three quietly miserable years.

In the entrance to his cubicle stood Gifford, Cody and Melba, three of Matt's co-workers. Gifford sported a giant foam finger avowing his allegiance to whatever sports team was currently high in the standings of whatever season it chanced to be. Cody had a silver hip flask raised to her lips, imbibing a liquid that Mutt could be fairly certain did not issue from the Poland Springs cooler. Melba had already undone her formerly decorous shirt several buttons upward from the hem and knotted it, exposing a belly that reminded Mutt of a slab of Godiva chocolate.

Mutt pictured with facile vividness the events of the evening that would ensue, should he choose to accept Gifford's invitation. His projections were based on numerous past such experiences. Heavy alcohol consumption and possible ingestion of illicit stimulants, followed by slurred, senseless conversation conducted at eardrum-piercing volume to overcome whatever jagged ambient noise was passing itself off as music these days. Some hypnagogic, sensory-impaired dancing with one strange woman or another, leading in all likelihood to a meaningless hookup, the details of which would be impossible to recall in the morning, resulting in hypochondriacal worries and vacillating commitments to get one kind of STD test or another. And of course the leftover brain damage and fraying of neurological wiring would insure that the demands of the office would be transformed from their usual simple hellishness to torture of an excruciating variety undreamed of by even, say, a team of Catholic school nuns and the unlamented Uday Hussein.

Gifford could sense his cautious friend wavering toward abstinence. "C'mon, Mutt! We're gonna hit Slamdunk's first, then Black Rainbow. And we'll finish up at Captains Curvaceous."

Mention of the last-named club, a strip joint where Mutt had once managed to drop over five hundred dollars of his tiny Christmas bonus while simultaneously acquiring a black eye and a chipped tooth, caused a shiver to surf his spine.

"Uh, thanks, guys, for thinking of me. But I just can't swing it. If I don't get this special ad section squared away by tonight, we'll miss the printer's deadlines."

Cody pocketed her flask and grabbed Gifford's arm. "Oh, leave the little drudge alone, Giff. It's obvious he's so in love with his job. Haven't you seen his lip-prints on the screen?"

Mutt was hurt and insulted. Was it his fault that he had been promoted to assistant editor over Cody? He wanted to say something in his defense, but couldn't think of a comeback that wouldn't sound whiny. And then the window closed on any possible repartee.

Gifford unselfconsciously scratched his butt with his foam finger. "Okay, pal, maybe next time. Let's shake a tail, ladies."

Melba winked at Mutt as she walked away. "Gonna miss you, loverboy."

Then the trio was gone.

Mutt hung his head in his hands. Why had he ever slept with Melba? Sleeping with co-workers was insane. Yet he had done it. The affair was over now, but the awkward repercussions lingered. Another black mark on his karma.

Refocusing on the screen, Mutt tried hard to proof the text floating before him. 'Epigenetix-brand sequencers guarantee faster throughput . . .' The words and pictures blurred into a

jittery multicolored fog like a mosh pit full of amoebas. Was he crying? For Christ's sake, why the hell was he crying? Just because he had to hold down a suck-ass job he hated just to pay his grad-school loans, had no steady woman, hadn't been snow-boarding in two years, had put on five pounds since the summer, and experienced an undeniable yet shameful thrill when contemplating the purchase of a new *necktie*?

Mutt knuckled the moisture from his eyes and mentally kicked his own ass for being a big baby. This wasn't a bad life, and plenty of people had it worse. Time to pull up his socks and buckle down and all that other self-improvement shit.

But not right now. Right now, Mutt needed a break. He hadn't lied to Gifford and the others, he had to finish this job tonight. But he could take fifteen minutes to websurf his way to some amusing site that would lift his spirits.

And that was how Mutt discovered Gondwanaland.

In retrospect, after the passage of time had erased his computer's logs, the exact chain of links leading to Gondwanaland was hard to reconfigure. He had started looking for new recordings by his favorite group, Dead End Universe. That had led somehow to a history of pirate radio stations. And from there it was a short jump to micronations.

Fascinated, Mutt lost all track of time as he read about this concept that was totally new to him.

Micronations – also known as cybernations, fantasy countries or ephemeral states – were odd blends of real-world rebellious politics, virtual artsy-fartsy projects and elaborate spoofs. Essentially, a micronation was any assemblage of persons regarding themselves as a sovereign country, yet not recognized by international entities such as the United Nations. Sometimes micronations were associated with real physical territory. The Cocos Islands had once been ruled as a fiefdom by the Clunies-Ross family. Sarawak was once the province of the White Rajas, as the Brooke clan had styled themselves.

With the advent of the internet, the number of micronations had exploded. There were now dozens of imaginary online countries predicated on different philosophies, exemplifying scores of different governmental systems, each of them more or less seriously arguing that they were totally within their rights to issue passports, currency and stamps, and to designate ministers, nobility and bureaucratic minions.

Mutt had always enjoyed fantasy sports in college. Imaginary leagues, imaginary rosters, imaginary games . . . Something about being totally in charge of a small universe had appealed to him, as an antidote to his lack of control over the important factors and forces that batted his own life around. He had spent a lot of time playing Sims too. The concept of cybernations seemed like a logical extension of those pursuits, an appealing refuge from the harsh realities of career and relationships.

The site Mutt had ended up on was a gateway to a whole host of online countries. The Aerican Empire, the Kingdom of Talossa, the Global State of Waveland, the Kingdom of Redonda, Lizbekistan . . . And Gondwanaland.

Memories of an introductory geoscience course came back to Mutt. Gondwanaland was the super-continent that had existed hundreds of millions of years ago, before splitting and drifting apart into the configuration of separate continental landforms familiar today.

Mutt clicked on the Gondwanaland button.

The page built itself rapidly on his screen. The animated image of a spinning globe dominated. Sure enough, the globe featured only a single huge continent, marked with interior divisions into states and featuring the weird names of cities.

Mutt was about to scan some of the text on the page when

his eye fell on the blinking time readout in the corner of the screen. Holy shit! Nine-thirty! He'd be here till midnight unless he busted his ass. Reluctantly abandoning the Gondwanaland page and its impossible globe, Mutt returned to his work.

Which still sucked. Maybe worse.

The next day Mutt was almost as tired as if he had gone out with Gifford and the gang. But at least his head wasn't throbbing and his mouth didn't taste as if he had french-kissed a hyena. Proofing the advertorial section had taken until eleven-forty-five, and by the time he had ridden the subway home, eaten some leftover General Gao's chicken, watched *Letterman's Top Ten* and fallen asleep, it had been well into the small hours of the morning. When his alarm went off at seven-thirty, he had thrashed about in confusion like a drowning man, dragged from some engrossing dream that instantly evaporated out of memory.

Once in the office, Mutt booted up his machine. He had been doing something interesting last evening, hadn't he? Oh, yeah, that Gondwanaland thing – Before his butt hit the chair, someone was IMing him. Oh, shit, Kicklighter wanted to see him in his office. Mutt got up to visit his boss.

He ran into Gifford in the hall. Unrepentant yet visibly hurting, Gifford managed a sickly grin. "Missed a swinging time last night, my friend. After her fifth jello shot, Cody got up on stage at Captains. Took two bouncers to get her down, but not before she managed to earn over a hundred bucks."

Mutt winced. This was more information than he needed about the extracurricular activities of his jealous co-worker. How would it be possible now to work on projects side-by-side with her, without conjuring up visions of her drunkenly shedding her clothing?

Suddenly this hip young urban wastrel shtick, the whole life-is-fucked-so-let's-get-fucked-up playacting that Mutt and his friends had been indulging in for so long looked incredibly boring and tedious and counterproductive, possibly even the greased chute delivering one's ass to eternal damnation. Mutt knew with absurd certainty that he could no longer indulge in such a wasteful lifestyle. Something inside him had shifted irrevocably, some emotional tipping point had been reached.

But what was he going to do with his life instead?

Making a half-hearted neutral comment to Gifford – no point in turning into some kind of zealous lecturing missionary asshole Gifford would tune out anyway – Mutt continued through the cube-farm.

Dan Kicklighter, the middle-aged editor of *PharmaNotes*, resembled the captain of a lobster trawler, bearded, burly and generally disheveled, as if continually battling some invisible Perfect Storm. He had worked at a dozen magazines in his career, everything from *Atlantic Monthly* to *Screw*. A gambling habit that oscillated from moderate – a dozen scratch-ticket purchases a day – to severe – funding an Atlantic City spree with money the bank rightly regarded as a year's worth of mortgage payments – had determined the jagged progression of his resumé. Right now, after some serious rehab, he occupied one of the higher posts of his career.

"Matthew, come in. I just want you to know that I'm going to be away for the next four days. Big industry conference in Boston. With a little detour to Foxwoods Casino on either side. But that's just between you and me." Kicklighter was upfront about his addiction, at least with his subordinates, and claimed that he was now cured to the point where he could indulge himself recreationally, like any casual bettor. "I'm putting you in charge while I'm gone. I know it's a lot of responsibility, but

I think you're up to it. This is a crucial week, and I'm counting on you to produce an issue we can all be proud of."

There were three assistant editors at *PharmaNotes*, so this advancement was not insignificant. But Mutt cringed at the temporary promotion. He just wanted to stay in his little miserable niche and not have anybody notice him. Yet what could he do? Deny the assignment? Wasn't such an honor the kind of thing he was supposed to be shooting for, next step up the ladder and all that shit? Cody would've killed for such a nomination.

"Uh, fine, Dan. Thank you. I'll do my best."

"That's what I'm counting on. Here, take this list of targets you need to hit before Monday. It's broken down into ten-minute activity blocks. Say, have you heard the odds on the Knicks game this weekend?"

Back in his cube, Mutt threw down the heavy sheaf of paper with disgust. He just knew he'd have to work through the weekend.

Before he had gotten through the tasks associated with the first ten-minute block, Cody appeared. "So, all your ass-kissing finally paid off. Well, I want you to know that you haven't fooled everyone here. Not by a long shot."

Before Mutt could protest his lack of ambition, Cody was gone. Her angry strut conjured up images of pole-dancing in Mutt's traitorous imagination.

A short time later, Melba sauntered in and poised one haunch on the corner of Mutt's desk. "Hey, big guy, got any plans for Friday night?"

"Yeah. Thanks to Kicklighter, I'll be ruining my eyesight right here at my desk."

Melba did not seem put off by Mutt's sour brusqueness. "Well, that's too bad. But I'm sure there'll be some other night we can, ah, hook up."

Once Melba left, Mutt tried to resume work. But he just couldn't focus. So he brought up the Gondwanaland page. Who was going to tell him he couldn't? Kicklighter was probably already out the office and halfway to the roulette wheels.

Below the spinning foreign globe was a block of text followed by some hot-button links: IMPERIAL LINEAGE, CUSTOMS, NATURAL HISTORY, POLITICAL HISTORY, ART, FORUMS, and so forth. Mutt began to read the main text.

For the past ten thousand years of recorded history, Gondwanaland's imperial plurocracy has insured the material well-being as well as the physical, spiritual and intellectual freedom of its citizens. Since the immemorial era of Fergasse I, when the walled communities of the Only Land – prominently, Lyskander, Port Shallow, Vybergum and Turnbuckle – emerged from the state of siege imposed by the roving packs of scalewags and amphidonts, banding together into a network of trade and discourse, right up until the current reign of Golusty IV, the ascent of the united peoples of Gondwanaland has been unimpeded by war or dissent, despite a profusion of beliefs, creeds, philosophical paradigms and social arrangements. A steady accumulation of scientific knowledge from the perspicacious and diligent researchers at our many technotoria, combined with the practical entrepreneurship of the ingeniator class, has led to a mastery of the forces of nature, resulting in such now-essential inventions as the strato-carriage, storm-dispeller, object-box and meta-palp.

The grateful citizens of Gondwanaland can assume – with a surety they feel when they contemplate the regular rising of the Innermost Moon – that the future will only continue this happy progression . . .

Fascinated, Mutt continued to scan the introductory text on the main page, before beginning to bop around the site. What he discovered on these dependent pages were numerous intriguing photos of exotic scenes – cities, people, buildings,

landscapes, artworks – and many more descriptive and explanatory passages that amounted to a self-consistent and utterly convincing portrait of an alien world.

The Defeat of the Last 'Warg; a recipe for bluebunny with groundnut sauce; *The Adventures of Calinok Cannikin*, by Ahleucha Mamarosa; Jibril III's tornado-struck coronation; the deadly glacier apes; the first landing on the Outermost Moon; the Immaculate Epidemic; the Street of Lanternmoths in Scordatura; the voices of children singing the songs of Mourners Day; the Teetering Needle in the Broken Desert; sunlight on the slate roofs of Saurelle; the latest fashion photographs of Yardley Legg –

Mutt's head was spinning and the clock icon on his screen read noon. Man, people thought Tolkien was an obsessive perfectionist dreamer! Whoever had put this site together was a goddamn fantasy genius! The backstory to Gondwanaland possessed the kind of organic cohesiveness that admitted of the random and contradictory. Why hadn't the citizens of Balamuth ever realized that they were sitting on a vein of pure allurium until a shepherd named Thunn Pumpelly fell into that sink-hole? They just hadn't! A hundred other circumstantial incidents and anecdotes contributed to the warp and woof of Gondwanaland, until in Mutt's mind the whole invention assumed the heft and sheen of a length of richly embroidered silk.

Mutt wondered momentarily if the whole elaborate hoax was the work of a single creator, or a group effort. Perhaps the name or names of the perps was hidden in some kind of Easter Egg –

The one link Mutt hadn't yet explored led to the FORUMS. Now he went there. He faced a choice of dozens of boards on different topics, all listing thousands of archived posts. He arbitrarily chose one – IMPERIAL NEWS – and read a few recent posts in chronological order.

Anybody heard any reports since Restday from the Liminal Palace on G4's health? — **IceApe113**

The last update from the Remediator General said G4 was still in serious condition. Something about not responding to the infusion of nurse-hemomites. — **LenaFromBamford**

Looks like we could be having an Imperial Search soon then. I hope the Cabal of Assessors has their equipment in good working order. When was the last IS? 9950, right? — **Gillyflower87**

Aren't we all being a little premature? Golusty IV isn't dead yet! — **IlonaG**

Mutt was baffled, even somehow a little pissed off, by the intensity of the roleplaying on display here. These people – assuming the posts indeed originated from disparate individuals – were really into this micronation game, more like Renaissance Faire headcases and Civil War reenactors than the art-student goofballs Mutt had envisioned as the people responsible for the Gondwanaland site. Still, their fervent loyalty to their fantasy world offered Mutt a wistful, appealing alternative to his own anomie.

Impulsively, Mutt launched his own post.

From everything I've seen, Golusty IV seems like a very fine Emperor and a good person. I hope he gets better. — **MuttsterPrime**

He quit his browser and brought up his word-processor.

Then he resumed trying to fit his life into ten-minute boxes.

Kicklighter returned from the Boston trip looking as if he had spent the entire time wrestling rabid tigers. Evidently, his cure had not been totally effective. His vaunted invulnerability to the seductions of Native-American-sponsored games of chance plainly featured chinks. An office pool was immediately begun centered on his probable date of firing by the publisher, Henry Huntsman. Ironically, Kicklighter himself placed a wager.

But all these waves of office scandal washed over Mutt without leaving any impression at all. Likewise, his dealings with his former friends and rivals had no impact on his abstracted equilibrium. Gifford's unceasing invitations to get wasted, Cody's sneers and jibes, Melba's purring attempts at seduction . . . none of these registered. Oh, Mutt continued to perform his job in a semi-competent, off-handed way. But most of the time his head was in Gondwanaland.

With his new best IM buddy, Ilona Grobes.

Ilona Grobes – IlonaG – had posted the well-mannered, respectful comment about not hastening Golusty IV into his grave. Upon reading Mutt's similarly themed post, she had contacted him directly.

MuttsterPrime, that was a sensitive and compassionate sentiment. I'm glad you're not so thrilled by the prospect of an IS like most of these vark-heads that you forget the human dimension of this drama. I don't recognize your name from any of the boards. What clade do you belong to? — **Ilona G**

That question left Mutt scratching his head. He debated telling Ilona to cut the fantasy crap and just talk straight to him. But in the end he decided to go along with the playacting.

Ilona, is my clade really so important? I'd like to think that we can relate to each other on an interpersonal level without such official designations coming between us. — **MuttsterPrime**

When Ilona's reply came, Mutt was relieved to see that his strategy of conforming to her game-playing had paid off.

How true! I never thought to hear from another Sloatist on this board! I only asked because I didn't want to give offense if you were an ultra-Yersinian. But it's so refreshing to dispense with such outdated formalities. Tell me some more about yourself. — **IlonaG**

Not much to tell really. I'm an assistant editor at a magazine, and it sucks. — **MuttsterPrime**

I'm afraid you've lost me there, Muttster. Why would a repository for excess grain need even one professional scurrilator, much less an assistant? And how can a condition or inanimate object "suck?" Where do you live? It must be someplace rather isolated, with its own dialect. Perhaps the Ludovici Flats? — **IlonaG**

Mutt stood up a moment and looked toward the distant window in the far-off wall of the cube-farm, seeing a slice of the towers of Manhattan and thereby confirming the reality of his surroundings. This woman was playing some serious games with his head. He sat back down.

Oh, my home town is no place you've ever heard of. Just a dreary backwater. But enough about my boring life. Tell me about yours! — **MuttsterPrime**

Ilona was happy to comply. Over the next several weeks, she spilled her life story, along with a freight of fascinating details about life in Gondwanaland.

Ilona had been born on a farm in the Ragovoy Swales district. Her parents raised moas. She grew up loving the books of Idanell Swonk and the antic-tableaus (were these movies?) featuring Roseway Partridge. She broke her arm when she was eleven, competing in the annual running of the aurochs. After finishing her schooling, earning an advanced instrumentality in cognitive combinatorics, she had moved to the big city of Tlun, where she had gotten a job with the Cabal of Higher Heuristics. (Best as Mutt could figure, her job had something to do with writing the software for artificial mineral-harvesting deep-sea fish.) Every Breathday Ilona and a bunch of girlfriends – fellow geeks, Mutt conjectured – would participate in *zymurgy*, a kind of public chess match where the pieces were represented by living people and the action took place in a three-dimensional labyrinth. She liked to relax with a glass of cloudberry wine and the music of Clay Zelta. (She sent Mutt a sample

when he said he wasn't familiar with that artist. It sounded like punk polkas with a dash of tango.)

The more Mutt learned about Ilona, the more he liked her. She might be crazy, living in this fantasy world of hers, but it was an attractive neurosis. The world she and her fellow hoaxers had built was so much saner and more exotic than the one Mutt inhabited. Why wouldn't anyone want to pretend they lived in such a place?

As for the larger outlines of Gondwanalandian society and its finer details, Mutt learned much that appealed to him. For instance, the role of Emperor or Empress was not an inherited one, or restricted to any particular class of citizen. Upon the death of the reigning monarch – whose powers were limited yet essential in the day-to-day functioning of the plurocracy – the Cabal of Assessors began a continent-wide search for a psychic heir. At death, the holy spirit of the ruler – not exactly that individual's unique soul, but something like free-floating semi-divine mojo – was believed to detach and descend on a destined individual, whose altered status could be confirmed by subtle detection apparatus. And then there was that eminently sensible business about every citizen receiving a lifetime stipend that rendered work not a necessity but a dedicated choice. Not to mention such attractions as the regular state-sanctioned orgies in such cities as Swannack, Harsh Deep and Camp Collard that apparently made Mardi Gras look like the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade.

As for the crisis of Golusty IV's impending death, the boards remained full of speculation and chatter. The remediators were trying all sorts of new treatments, and the Emperor's health chart resembled Earth's stock markets' gyrations, one minute up and the next way down.

Earth's stock market? Mutt was shocked to find himself so convinced of Gondwanaland's reality that he needed to distinguish between the two worlds.

With some judicious self-censorship and liberal use of generalities, Mutt was able to convey something of his life and character to Ilona as well, without baffling her further. He made up a lot of stuff too, incidents and anecdotes that dovetailed with Gondwanalandian parameters. Her messages began to assume an intimate tone. As did Mutt's.

By the time Ilona sent him her picture, Mutt realized he was in love. The photograph clinched it. (It was too painful for Mutt even to dare to think the image might be a fake, the Photoshop ruse of some thirteen-year-old male dweeb.) Ilona Grobes was a dark-haired, dark-eyed beauty with a charming mole above quirked lips. If all cognitive combinatorics experts looked like this, Gondwanaland had proved itself superior in the geek department as well. With the photo was a message:

Dear Mutt, don't you think it's time we met in the flesh? The Emperor can't live much longer, and of course all non-essential work and other activities will be suspended during the moratorium of the Imperial Search, for however long that may take. We could use those leisurely days to really get to know each other better. — IlonaG

Finally, here was the moment when all charades would collapse, for good or ill. After some deliberation, Mutt attached his own photo and wrote back:

Getting together would be really great, Ilona. Just tell me where you live, and I'll be right there! — MuttsterPrime

You're such a joker, Mutt! You know perfectly well that I live at Number 39 Badgerway in the Funes district of Tlun! When can you get here? The aerial tramway service to Tlun is extensive, no matter where you live. Here's a pointer to the online schedules. Try not to keep me waiting too long! And I think your auroch-lick hairstyle is charming! — IlonaG

Mutt felt his spirits slump. He was in love with a clinically insane person, one so mired in her delusions that she could not break out even when offered genuine human contact. Should he cut things off right here and now? No, he couldn't bring himself to.

Let me check those schedules and tidy up some loose ends here, Ilona. Then I'll get right back to you. — MuttsterPrime

Mutt was still sitting in a motionless, uninspired funk half an hour later when Kicklighter called him into his office.

All the editor's photos were off the walls and in cardboard boxes, along with his other personal possessions. The hairy, rumpled man looked relieved. "I'm outta here as of this minute, kid. Security's coming to escort me to the front door. But I wanted to let you know that I put in a good word for you to take over my job. Huntsman might not like my extracurricular activities too much, but he's a good publisher and realizes I know my stuff when it comes to getting a magazine out. He trusts me on matters of personnel. So you've got a lock on the job, if you want it. And who wouldn't? But you've got to get your head out of your ass. I don't know where you've been the past few weeks, but it hasn't been here."

All Mutt could do was stare at Kicklighter without responding. Scurrilator, he thought. Why would I want to be head scurrilator?

After another awkward minute, Mutt managed to mumble some thanks and good-luck wishes, then left.

He dropped in to Gifford's cubicle. Maybe his friend could offer some advice.

Gifford looked like shit. His tie was askew, his face pale and bedewed with sweat. There was a white crust around his nostrils like the rim of Old Faithful. He smiled wanly when he saw Mutt. "Hey, pal, I'd love to talk to you right now, but I don't feel so good. Little touch of stomach trouble. In fact, I gotta hit the john pronto."

Gifford bulled past Mutt. He smelled like spoiled yogurt.

Mutt wandered purposelessly through the cube-farm. He found himself at Cody's box. She glared at him and said, "If you're here like the rest of them to gloat, you can just get in line."

"Gloat? About what?"

"Oh, come on, don't pretend you haven't heard about the layoffs."

"No – no, I haven't, really. I'm – I'm sorry, Cody."

Cody just snorted and turned away.

Melba wasn't in her cube. Mutt learned why from an official notice on the bulletin board near the coffee-maker. *If any employee is contacted by any member of the media regarding the sexual discrimination suit lodged by Ms Melba Keefe, who is on extended leave until litigation is settled, he or she will refrain from commenting upon penalty of dismissal . . .*

Back in his cubicle, Mutt brought up the Gondwanaland web page. The coastline of Gondwanaland bore unmistakable resemblances to the geography Mutt knew, the way an assembled jigsaw puzzle recalled the individual lonely pieces. As far as he could make out, Tlun was located where Buenos Aires was on Earth.

Ilona, I'm going to try to reach you somehow. I'm setting out today. Wish me luck. — MuttsterPrime

Mutt left his cheap hotel – roaches the size of bite-sized Snickers bars, obese hookers smoking unfiltered cigarettes and trolling the corridors 24/7 – for the fifth time that day. He carried a twofold map. Before he had left the US, he had printed off a detailed street map of Tlun. He had found a similar map

for Buenos Aires and transferred it to a transparent sheet. Using certain duplicate, unvarying physical features such as rivers and the shape of the bay, he had aligned the two. This cartographic construction was what he was using to search for Number 39 Badgerway.

Of course, Buenos Aires featured no such street in its official atlas. And the neighborhood that Ilona supposedly lived in was of such a rough nature as to preclude much questioning of the shifty-eyed residents – even if Mutt’s Spanish had been better than the *¿Que pasa, amigo?* variety. Watched suspiciously by glue-huffing, gutter-crawling juveniles and their felonious elders hanging out at nameless bars, Mutt could only risk a cursory inspection of the Badgerway environs.

After checking out the most relevant district, Mutt was reduced to wandering the city’s boulevards and alleys, parks and promenades, looking for any other traces of a hidden, subterranean, alternative city that plainly didn’t exist anywhere outside the fevered imagination of a handful of online losers, praying for a glimpse of an unforgotten female face graced by a small mole. Maybe Ilona was some Argentinian hacker-girl who had been subliminally trying to overcome her own reluctance to divulge her real whereabouts by giving him all these clues.

But even if that were the case, Mutt met with no success.

He had now been in Argentina for ten days. All costs, from expensively impromptu airline tickets to meals and lodging, had been put on plastic. He had turned his last paycheck into local currency for small purchases, but Mutt’s loan payments had left him no nestegg. And the upper limits on his lone credit card weren’t infinite. Pretty soon he’d have to admit defeat, return to New York, and try to pick up the shambles of his life.

But for the next few days anyhow, he would continue to look for Tlun and Ilona.

Returning today to the neighborhood labeled Funes on the Tlun map, Mutt entered a small café he had come to patronize only because it was marginally less filthy than any other. He ordered a coffee and a pastry. Spreading his map on the scarred countertop he scratched his stubble and pondered the arrangement of streets. Had he explored every possible niche – ?

A finger tapped Mutt’s shoulder. He turned to confront a weaselly individual whose insincere yet broad smile revealed more gaps than teeth. The fellow wore a ratty Von Dutch t-shirt that proclaimed I KISS BETTER THAN YOU.

“*Señor*, what is it you look for? Perhaps I can help. I know this district like the breast of my own mother.”

Mutt realized that this guy must be some kind of con-artist. But even so, he represented the best local informant Mutt had yet encountered, the only person who had deigned to speak with him.

Pointing to the map, Mutt said, “I’m looking for this street. Do you know it?”

“*Sí, seguro!* I will take you there without delay!”

Experiencing a spark of hope, Mutt followed the guide outside.

They came to a dank *calle* Mutt was half-sure he had visited once before. The guide gestured to a shadowy cross-street that was more of a channel between buildings, only large enough for pedestrian traffic. A few yards along, the street transformed into a steep flight of greasy twilit stairs.

“Right down here, *señor*, you will find *exactamente* what you are looking for.”

Mutt tried to banish all fear from his heart and head. He summoned up into his mind’s eye Ilona’s smiling face. He advanced tentatively into the claustrophobic cattle-chute.

He heard the blow coming before he felt it. Determined not to lose his focus on Ilona, he still could not help flinching. The blow sent him reeling, blackness seeping over Ilona’s face like spilled tar, until only her smile, Cheshire-cat-like, remained, then faded.

Sunlight poured through lacy curtains, illuminating a small cheerful room. On the wall hung a painting which Mutt recognized as one of Sigalit’s studies for his *Skydancer* series. Mutt saw a vase filled with strange flowers on a nearby small table. Next to the flowers sat a box labeled LIBERTO’S ECLECTIC PASTILLES and a book whose spine bore the legend: *Ancient Caprices*, by Idanell Swonk.

Mutt lay in what was obviously a hospital bed, judging by the peripheral gadgetry around him, including an object-box and a pair of meta-palps. The blanket covering him diffused an odd yet not unpleasant odor, as if woven from the hairs of an unknown beast. He saw what looked like a call button and he buzzed it.

A nurse hurried into the room, all starched calm business in her traditional tricornered hat and life-saving medals.

Behind her strode Ilona Grobes.

Ilona hung back smiling only until the nurse assured herself that Mutt was doing fine and left. Then Ilona flung herself on Mutt. They hugged wordlessly for minutes before she stood up and found a seat for herself.

“Oh, Mutt, what *happened* to you? A Junior Effectuator found you unconscious a few feet from my door and brought you here. I was at work. The first thing I knew about your troubles was when I saw your picture on the evening propaedeutic. ‘Unknown citizen hospitalized.’ I rushed right here, but the remediators told me not to wake you. You slept for over thirty hours, right from Fishday to Satyrday!”

Mutt grabbed Ilona’s hand. “Let’s just say I had kind of a hard time getting to Tlun.”

Ilona giggled. “What a funny accent you have! That’s one thing that doesn’t come across online.”

“And you – you’re more beautiful than any photo. And you smell like – like vanilla icecream.”

Ilona looked shyly away, then back. “I’m sure that’s a compliment, whatever vanilla icecream may be. But look – I brought you some candy, and one of my favorite books.”

“Thank you. Thank you very much for being here.”

No icecream, Mutt thought. He’d be a millionaire by this time next year.

They talked for several hours more, until the sounds of some kind of commotion out in the hall made them pause.

The door to Mutt’s room opened and three men walked in. They were clad in elaborately stitched ceremonial robes and miters, and carried among them several pieces of equipment.

Seeing Mutt’s puzzlement, Ilona explained. “It’s just a team of Assessors. Golusty died yesterday, shortly after your arrival. The Imperial Search has begun.”

One Assessor addressed Ilona. “Citizen Grobes, your testing will take place at your residence. But we need to assess this stranger now.”

“Of course,” Ilona said.

The Assessors approached Mutt’s bedside. “With your permission, citizen – ”

Mutt nodded, and they placed a cage of wires studded with glowing lights and delicate sensors on his head like a crown.

Paul is the author of hundreds of short stories and several novels, the most recent of which include *Fuzzy Dice* and *Spondulix*. He lives in Providence, Rhode Island.

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The journal Sophie had found in the street lay lightly on her lap in the dark. Since they had left the city, the view out the windows hadn't changed – motorway embankments with grass etched in headlights, road markings flowing by. They could have been anywhere. "Tim, are you sure this place actually exists?" she asked.

"Course it does," said Tim. "It does a lot of business."

"Right. Are we nearly there yet?"

"Christ, you're like a five-year-old. Yes. I think so. In fact, here's the exit now." Tim flipped the indicator on and they entered a dark sliproad, which curved off into black fields. Ahead, across flat land, a small white square appeared. It grew and grew until it was clearly a huge, floodlit sign, bearing the legend: LOST THINGS SAVED IN BOXES.

"Here we are. Is Lisa still asleep?"

"Hmph," said Lisa, waking. "Wow. That is *trippy*." Ahead of them, ranged along a twisting concrete road on what looked like an industrial estate site, were twenty-six house-sized, multicoloured boxes. Another signpost in front of them pointed to PARKING; EXCHANGE OFFICE; TO THE BOXES. A smaller one said SEARCHERS SEARCH ENTIRELY AT THEIR OWN RISK.

"You know the rules," said the caretaker. The office was a small Portakabin whose walls were stained yellowish, evidently to do with the thick cloud of smoke he was sitting in. He ground out the current butt in a clay ashtray which said 'A Present from Ur' and peered up at them through watery, reddish eyes. "You give us something lost you found. You take one item away. No exchanges or refunds. No correspondence will be entered into. We endeavour to sort objects alphabetically but a degree of mis-sorting is unfortunately unavoidable. Your statutory rights are waived. Is that clear?"

Sophie began, "So how –"

Tim, possibly not hearing her, declared, "Yes, that's fine. Do we give you our exchange items now?"

The caretaker patted the desk with a gnarled hand. Sophie shrugged and reached into her bag.

Tim handed in an umbrella he'd found on the Tube; it had a novelty design of pigs and the slogan 'It's Piggin' Raining'. The caretaker tutted, obviously not impressed. "You won't get much for that," he said.

"How do you know? Someone might have *loved* that umb –" Tim began. Sophie kicked him in the shin and he fell silent, glaring sidelong at her. The caretaker, ignoring him, took a brown paper label, wrote 'Lost Umbrella' and tied it to the handle with a piece of string, then placed it carefully in a battered cardboard box.

Next it was Lisa's turn. She stepped forward, quietly confident, and handed the caretaker a small silver brooch in the shape of a ship. He turned it over and over in his hands, his eyes glinting. "It was just lying in the grass in the park," Lisa supplied. "Someone must miss it, yeah?"

"They do indeed," said the caretaker, writing a label that said 'Lost Ship'.

"But it's not a ship," Lisa said. "It's a brooch."

"It's a ship," said the caretaker, and put it in the box. "Can't you see the beautiful sails? Now you, love," turning to Sophie.

She cleared her throat. "It's a sort of diary. Some boy writing about his life, and there are stories and poems too. They're pretty good. But there's no name on it."

"Very well," the caretaker said, "give it here." He attached a label reading 'Lost Thoughts'. Sophie blinked. Before she could object, the caretaker clicked his fingers and a small, stooped woman appeared from a door at the back and whisked the box away. "Now, you lot," he went on, "what are you after?"

Lisa had evidently been waiting impatiently to speak. "I've lost a floppy disc with my thesis on it. It's due next week." She ignored Tim's mutter of "Sensible people make backups, you know." "Have you seen anything like that?"

"Discs!" cried the caretaker. "Oh, many discs. Floppy discs and hard discs and compact discs, gold discs, clay discs, marble discs, disc jockeys, slipped discs. There's too many for the D box so we keep them all over the place. Back in the days of the old management, now, we might have applied for permission to enlarge the D box, but this lot are a shower of shrinking violets, won't rock the boat, you know, and even if they wanted to there'd be hundreds of forms to fill in. In my day . . . but anyway, dear, it might be filed under T for Thesis, or K for Knowledge or even S for Square, being as how it isn't actually disc-shaped, you know –"

"Then we'd better get going," said Tim. "We'll have to look in them all. The permit's only for tonight, isn't it?"

"That's correct. Business confined to the hours of darkness. Our filing staff are here during the day. But you, sir, what is it that you –"

Tim, paying no attention, marched out the door.

"Trippy," said Lisa, as they followed him out. She took a can of Coke from her bag and tugged the ring. "Long night ahead of us, folks."

They entered the A box ("let's work through them systematically" – Tim), which was striped in yellow and green, through a narrow door in the side. Inside there were ranks of shelves for smaller objects and larger things stacked on the floor. A bare bulb in the ceiling threw everything into harsh light and shadow. Lisa hurried along the shelves, scanning them anxiously for her disc. Tim disappeared into the shadows in the other direction. Sophie headed for the centre, more slowly; she doubted her lost watch, which had been given her as a twenty-first birthday present by a boy she had loved, would have been filed under A however creative the system was. She came upon a thicket of easels and plinths, all holding things labelled Lost Art, and spent a few minutes inspecting them. Lisa came up behind as she was examining Lost Art (of Keeping a Secret). "No disc," she said with a sigh. "Hey – is that what I think it is?"

Next to the easels, with a rough square of yellow and black police tape around it, was a large box of polished wood, ancient in aspect, with inlaid gold and jewels and a design of scrolls on the top.

"No way," Sophie said, her voice dropping to a whisper.

Sure enough, there was a brown paper label which read Lost Ark.

"We can take one object, whatever it is, right?" Lisa said with a nervous giggle.

"Well, there's that thing about 'if you are an appropriate owner'," Sophie said. "I wouldn't want to try."

"No joy," called Tim from the door. "Let's go."

The B box was blue with small yellow daisies and held little of interest. Sophie was momentarily tempted by a black and white Lost Bass, but held out in hope of her watch. Lisa's disc was not in the B box, and Tim apparently had had no luck either. They moved on to C.

"What's that smell? Ew," Lisa said. "Mould."

"Maybe it's all these Lost Cakes," Sophie said, as Tim plunged into the forest of items again and vanished scowling behind a rank of Lost Cameras and Lost Copybooks. It occurred to her that her watch might have been mislabelled as a Lost Clock, but her search was in vain.

"What do you think this is?" she asked Lisa, showing her something which looked like a keyboard but only had two buttons labelled Panic and Don't Panic. "Oh – look." There was after all a label, which read 'Lost Control'. "Lisa – did Tim ever mention what he was looking for?" Sophie asked. "I can't remember."

"I thought *you* knew. Ooh – shiny." Lisa hurried over towards something like an architectural model, dragging Sophie with her. Sophie was sure she'd never seen an architectural model made of gold before. It was under a glass case. She blinked hard. Were people moving in the streets? Were there tiny wispy clouds above the shining towers and spires? The label said Lost City. "Wow," she said again.

Lisa clearly had high hopes of the D box, but her disc (pale blue, she said, with 'Lisa's Disc' written on it in blueberry-scented pen) was not to be found however they searched. A Lost Dodo watched them with its beak-heavy head on one side, the label tied to its ankle, as they sat on the floor sur-

rounded by piles of Lost Discs. "Word to the wise. I wouldn't go near the Lost Dreams rack if I were you," it suddenly squawked. "Unless of course you've lost a particular dream. The kind where you've managed to pin down one corner of it and keep it, so you have a swatch to match with. The dreams are keen to be found and they don't mind by whom."

"You help out here?" Sophie asked.

"You're talking to a dodo," Tim said.

"It spoke first," she replied.

"Trippy," said Lisa.

The dodo cleared its throat. "I might as well make myself useful, I thought. Anyway, be careful."

The disc not found, they had a look at the Lost Dreams rack – they were stored in jars next to Lost Days – from a safe distance across the room before moving on.

The E, F and G boxes proved just as empty of watches, discs and whatever it was Tim was looking for. He was becoming increasingly frustrated, striding ahead of them towards the H box. A single object took up most of the H box; it looked like a gargantuan swiss roll made of tarmac and gravel, with bits of grass clinging to the edges.

"I wonder who owned the Lost Highway," Sophie said, scanning the shelves in the remaining space.

"Yeah," said Lisa, "I wouldn't want to have to come and pick it up. Hey, gross, look at the lost hearts. Some of them are actually beating."

"Ugh." Sophie turned away, telling herself she was glad – and wise – never to have lost her own. A fragment of the unknown boy's diary passed through her mind: something about knowing he was capable of true love, whatever that was, if he could only find it. She shrugged it off.

Something glinted in the corner of her eye. On closer inspection, it looked like a rolled-up ball of delicate chain, the links she could see at one end quite dull, but each successive one stronger and brighter. It seemed mesmerisingly beautiful. She picked it up, feeling its weight. At once images flowed into her mind and their associated feelings clenched her chest: images through someone's eyes. There was a flash of hands, long male hands, typing 'The End'. There was a beautiful, groomed girl in expensive clothes standing in a doorway, saying, "I was wrong, I know that now", but this was faint. Almost immediately imposed on that was a pair of deep eyes with love in them, but the face and body around them were vague – a blurry ideal, waiting for details. There was an image of a large parcel arriving in a small dingy flat, a knife hacking at the tape around it, flaps flowering open to show a stack of fresh-printed books, all the same. There was a flow of colours, as the watcher travelled through many lands, established enough now not to need a day job, writing about them as he went, remembering everything for posterity before it disappeared. Headlines raving, hailing him as the next great voice. A cheer as a trophy of some sort was placed in the hands. A knot of stunning women standing at the side of the stage giggled among themselves ("This one's a bit of all right, I'd have him any day. Okay, I *do* have a fetish for intelligent men"). Faint and far along the chain, there was a house made of grey stone, covered with ivy, and inside it a wood-panelled study, and a dog lying on the feet as the hands typed at another book, and maybe this was the one (his trade now learnt, his craft honed) which would actually change the way people thought, change the world for the better –

"Soph! Come on!" Tim was shaking her. She shook herself. What was that? *Who* was that? She looked at the tag as she put the object down; it seemed reluctant to be left. Lost Hopes.

"Wait!" she cried. "I think this belongs to the same person as—"

"It's not your sodding watch, is it? We're only at H and it's getting late. Get a move on." He hurried out the door.

She followed, rolling her eyes. "What's up with you tonight, anyway? You've done nothing but nag and whinge ever since we got here. What is it you've lost that has you so worried?" His back was receding into the dark and he gave no sign of having heard. Tim's problems seemed distant compared to the bath of emotion she'd just been dunked in. She remembered reading the notebook, or diary, or whatever, curled up in bed, and falling asleep with a strange disquiet. She thought of the stack of photocopied paper on her desk at home, copies of the pages of the notebook, because she'd wanted to keep it just as much as she'd wanted the owner to have it back.

There had been a name in the rave headlines and on the covers of the freshly printed books, but it had slid off the surface of her mind in the torrent of impressions. Suddenly it seemed to her that remembering the name was the most important thing she could do. She wondered if that lost memory was now sitting waiting for her in the M box. How did this place work, anyway?

She was preoccupied as they searched I (Lost Innocences, which mostly seemed to be delicately painted eggshells, blushed sky blue and dawn pink, packed in plastic snow to keep them from breaking) and J and K and L. Lisa's good humour was increasingly trickling away as she continued to search fruitlessly for her disc, but Sophie couldn't keep her mind focused on providing sympathy. What was the name? What was the name?

The Lost Languages grabbed her attention for a moment. She found a dialect of Connemara Irish, only spoken by the inhabitants of one particular rocky seaside valley (which was now a bustling suburb of Galway City with tracts of desirable two- and three-bedroom family housing, a Dixons, a Tesco, a PetStop Warehouse and a six-screen multiplex, the explanatory note read). It had had thirty-one words for seaweed. She read the words for red blobby seaweed, black stringy seaweed, fresh seaweed from today's tide, dried seaweed you can hurt your foot on at the beach, seaweed you can put in cakes, seaweed you can put in soup, the seaweed with little air pockets you can pop, and the most dangerous seaweed for slipping on when you're crossing the rocks, then noticed with alarm that all those words had disappeared from the page. She put the book down, glancing around guiltily. "What did I do? Did I accidentally rub them out?"

"Well, I suppose that if they're in your head they're not lost any more," Lisa said, shrugging. "So it's now your job to remember them, or whatever."

"This place is freaking me out," Sophie said. She shivered. "Maybe I should just go straight to W and see if the watch is there and be done with it."

"Hey. I've got to look through all these other ones first. It's freaking me out too. Don't leave me with only misery-guts Tim for company."

Sophie sighed. "Oh, all right. But keep an eye on me, okay? Don't let me pick up any more random things."

There were indeed Lost Memories in the M box (white with red polkadots), but not the memory of the writer's name from the Hopes, or indeed Sophie's watch (not even shelved in French), or Lisa's disc or whatever it was that was driving Tim crazy. There were some beautiful lost moments and a dusty sculpture of a Medusa, but they hurried on, and on through N and O.

At the P box they could barely get through the door. The

box was choked by drifts and piles of lost phones, some of the piles as high as the ceiling. They had to wade in across them. Sophie heard Lisa muttering to herself, bemoaning the fact that if they crammed all the phones in here, they could just as well have crammed all the discs in the D box and saved her all this trouble, but this was interrupted by a phone going off here or there at odd moments, those whose batteries had not yet run down. They heaved armfuls of phones about and floundered like children in a ball pond. Sophie's fingers brushed a bundle of odd-textured paper. She pulled it out – it was sheets of papyrus, inscribed in a language she couldn't read. "Hey, look at this," she said. "E-Y-P-I . . . funny triangle thing . . . is that Greek? Do you think it's important?"

"Iunno," shrugged Lisa, tossing another armful of blinking gadgets.

The tag said Lost Play. As she looked at it, one dog-eared corner flaked off. She put it on one of the higher piles of phones in the hope that it would avoid further harm. It took a long time to satisfy themselves that the things they were looking for were not in the P box. Finally, wearily, they moved on. At least the Q box was easier; there was very little in it but some bottled Lost Quiet. One bottle of it came from the seaweed valley, Sophie noticed. The R box held little that was remarkable either. Tim had sunk into uncommunicative silence as they started on S. Sophie tried to stay attentive, but she couldn't keep from dwelling on the Lost Hopes, and the notebook, and her desire to know the name.

The S box was mysteriously shadowed; several Lost Ships propped dryly against the walls were casting shapes on the walls, shored up by Lost Suitcases. On the far wall there were shelves from which faint threads of sound were wisping. Tim's head snapped up. "Finally," he said, sounding cheerful for the first time that night. He hurried over to the shelves. The girls followed. Finally what? Tim was rummaging through the objects on the shelf. As they caught up, he was reaching for one shaped something like a book towards the back, or perhaps it was the book beside it; they were both labelled Lost Story – but which one it was they were not to find out. Tim lifted a bundle of solid vapour with a label that read Lost Songs and froze to the spot. The binding string fell off the Lost Songs. The vapour began to ooze up Tim's arms. Sophie tried to slap it away, but her hand went through. Evidently it was only solid for Tim.

"Oh God," said Lisa. "It's his. It wants to be his object." Tim's eyes bulged as the vapour rose to encircle his head and seemed to be absorbed through his skull, then was gone. He staggered. "Tim? Tim? What was that?" Sophie asked. "Are you okay?"

Tim blinked, struggling to speak, terror in his eyes, but what he said – or sang – was "You do the Shake'n'Vac and put the freshness back, do the Shake'n'Vac and put the freshness back."

"What is he on?" cried Lisa.

"It must be every song he's ever forgotten," Sophie said. "Coming back at once."

"The Bony King of Nowhere is smiling on his throne," Tim sang, his voice wobbling.

"I know that one. That's from Bagpuss."

Veins were standing out on Tim's forehead. Sophie grasped him by the shoulders. "Tim, can you hear me? What do we do?"

"One of these kids is doing his own thing, doing his own thing, doing his own thing," Tim warbled. He grabbed the hand of each girl and clung on, knuckles white, steering them towards the door.

There was movement in the T box ahead. "There's someone

in there," said Sophie. "Let's ask for help."

A tall bronze man met her at the door, magnificent in a feathered headdress. "Are you staff?" she asked. "Do you know what's wrong with Tim here?"

"I am not staff. I am chief of the Lost Tribe," he replied.

"Oh. Heh. Sorry."

Tim sang, "Maybe tomorrow I'll wanna settle down, until tomorrow I'll just keep moving on."

Inside the box she could see tents set up around a small fire and other tribespeople smoking pipes and roasting meat.

The chief said, "I cannot help your friend. But he is strong. He will get well."

Lisa, peering into the box, let out a squeak and darted in past them. She held up a book, bound in blue leather with a gilt title on the front. "Look. *The Function of Celebrity in Modern Society*, BA Media Studies, Lisa Stevens. Good fuck." Sure enough, the label said *Lost Thesis*. "It's dated in a week's time," said Lisa, bewildered.

An old tribeswoman called over from the fire. "Girl, your thought-tablet is behind your sleeping mat in your wigwam. Go home and you'll find it there."

"How do you know that?" Lisa asked, but the woman ignored her.

"I'd rather Jack than Fleetwood Mac," Tim falsettoed behind them.

"We should get him home," Sophie said.

"You must take something. Leave something, take something. It's the way."

"Okay, okay. I'll try W on the way out."

Sophie ran empty-handed, and Lisa ran clutching her blue book, with Tim pulled along between them singing breathless fragments all the way, past *Lost Uncertainties* and *Lost Virgi-*

nities, and there Sophie left them to hurry into the W box (striped in navy and blue). She ignored *Lost Words* and *Lost Worlds* and *Lost Weekends*, plunging her arms into the large box of *Lost Watches*. Her fingers brushed a familiar smooth surface and she drew out her watch, laying it on top of the pile. She regarded it for a moment, hesitating. She was thinking of the silver chain and the book she'd handed in. Each person must bring out one object . . . Deciding, she stood up and walked back to the door.

"Lisa, can you get him to the exit? I need to go back for something."

"What?"

"I'll tell you later. Just get our songbird to the office and I'll join you in a minute. Don't worry."

Lisa raised her eyebrows, said "All right, then," and led Tim off past *Lost Xanthophyll* and *Youth and Zing*, back towards the *Portakabin*, while Sophie ran headlong through the striped dark, back towards H. Inside the box she picked up the bundle of chain. "I'm taking this," she announced, though there may not have been anyone to hear. "I know it's not mine, but I'm taking it anyway." The chain began to unwind, vanishing link by link. The pictures flowed into her mind again, the lost hopes of an unknown boy. She grasped for detail as they entered, caught what she could, then they lay flat and quiet along her synaptic pathways, becoming dormant and fuzzy, stored along with her own memories. She shook her head; for an instant she hadn't been sure who she was, but that feeling was receding. She smiled.

Sophie walked out of the H box to find dawn breaking. She headed back towards the exit, slowly now, calmly. Somehow she would find this boy and find a way to restore his hope to him. X

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I'm Tricia alone but in the plural it's we; so, then, we fly above America. Our plane sweeps low, and we move to the window in the fuselage, press our palms against the glass. Below us is a stream of ground, black on gray, eyes tumbling through the fluid like leaves through a flash storm in fall. The eyes, pupil wide or narrow, see nothing, focus on nothing, least of all on us in the plane. We watch therefore almost blushing, ashamed of our voyeurism.

At last we hear the bell and raise our hands from the glass. We look at each other and grin, expressing our relief. We are all of us well dressed, the men in tuxedos of every color, the women in long gowns of satin and shimmering wire. Because we are old our beauty has passed; even the most attractive have sags of flesh around their throats and straws of gray in their black hair. The youngest are fawned upon by their elders, regardless of sex. A few are moving to the dance floor, a polished wax platform resting upon the glass belly of the plane. Sweet chamber music is piped in through the speakers in the corner, and the dances are elegant, full of bowing and maneuvering, often a Viennese waltz though the tempo is always in four-four time.

I rest awhile, sitting, my long silver dress falling to the floor. Then I push myself to my feet, holding onto the cushion of a chair with arms that spiral inward like the windings of a conch shell. Felin, the man who was next to me when we watched America below apparently believes I'm having difficulty. "Help?" he says.

"Thank you, no," I say, finally on my feet. The eyes must have a place in his heart where once there was love. This is what I guess. But he says, "You're extraordinary," and he hands me a goblet of wine.

I take it. "Thank you." I smile, sip, then turn away, looking toward the back of the plane, the lounge. I hope to see my lady friends; we often gather to play games of chance or gossip about the young men we would like to meet. As I watch the lounge and hear the tinkle of the baby grand slipping in under the voluminous piped strings, I let the wine rest in a depression in my tongue. Not a bad rosé, but I have a problem with my taste buds—I can't differentiate between Californian and French wines any more. We're all getting older, but that's a variable independent of our plane's passage over the face of America.

Now I see Deborah, who lives down the corridor from me. She's already standing at our table in the lounge, handsome in her many-layered blue dress. But there are so many people that she does not seem to see me, even when she looks in my direction. I transfer the wine goblet to my left hand so that I can wave with my right and—

"Somewhere else, would you say?" Felin asks. We both look down; though the pilot has made the floor translucent, one can still make out the eyes, looking like crackers submerged in milk.

"I suppose."

He puts his arm around my shoulders; he smells faintly of aftershave. We move to the forward side of the dance floor, where there are several tables, each surrounded by large pillows. As I walk, the tap of my heels echoes through the fuselage.

"The eye," Felin says, "is an evolutionary impossibility."

We sit at one of the tables, sinking to our waists in the pillows. I ask him, "What did you mean by that comment?"

With a wink Felin signals Harry the steward, then he says, "Darwin's problem. The eye is a complex device." With his fingers, he is drawing invisible diagrams on the table. "Evolution, Darwin said, was a gradual process. Eyes didn't spring up in their full complexity. Gradual steps. But the eye is a glorious

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machine. Each part is related to the others. No component is superfluous. The mechanism is efficient. Agreed, Tricia?" He raises his top lip, exposing the tips of his dentures.

I nod, sipping on my wine. I don't know the significance of his expression.

"Yes, then. Well we have assumed the veracity of evolution. But there must be intermediate steps. Some part of the machine must have come into existence after the others. We must thus postulate an imperfect machine. Perhaps a non-functional machine."

I humor him. "Of course."

His dentures droop and he tongues them back into place. "Then you see the problem! The eye, before perfection, existed without purpose." He closes his eyes; his lids are thin, the veins are thick. "But everything must serve a purpose . . ." He opens his eyes. "The inconsistency is astounding. Proof by contradiction."

Felin does not see me smile at his absurdity because Harry has arrived. "A scotch and water with a lemon," he says, his voice arrogant. When the steward has left, Felin looks at me. "Tricia, have you a reply? Or is my argument unassailable? What can one say to the death of Darwinism?"

I play: I sip wine, I bend the plastic tips on my fingernails. Felin smiles patiently. Then I say, "The eye is a perfect device, yes, but only in that it is adequate to the demands of the biological niche within which it operates. There was a more primitive eye antecedent to the present one; it, too, was a perfect device, for its niche was a different one."

Felin is turning red. Oh, I already said he was red. Imagine, then, a radish bleeding. Harry the steward, who had returned and waited patiently while I was finishing my lecture, puts his drink down in front of Felin and clasps his well-manicured hand upon Felin's shoulder. "Both of you are equipping your arguments with emotional nomenclature. Evolution has nothing to do with perfection, unless perfection is defined in terms of evolution. You're looking for plans, by-the-numbers progressions. Useless. For discussing evolution in teleological terms obscures the deterministic rules of the universe."

Determinism. A pretty word. But not one that can be escaped: see, Felin continues to turn red, as if choking. In fact, he is choking; he clutches at his throat, his cheeks puffed and blazing crimson, his eyes bulging as if they are about to pop out of the sockets.

It is the lemon, in his throat. He appeals to me with a silent "Help," but I find it hard to act, so moved am I by the simplicity of determinism. I remember with a thrill my professor: the balding man with wire-rimmed glasses, who pontificated upon the subject. He demonstrated that each state of the universe could be represented as a set of coordinates in a matrix, and that the transformation from one state to the next could be calculated with a set of equations. Of all the students I was the most fascinated: all the times to come are thus available to us right now, if we would only have the patience to calculate. Being young, I loved the teacher; when all others had left I remained in the classroom, trying to determine the numbers of the universe; the electron spins and probabilities, the muon decay and alpha split, to find if the matrices would have the teacher someday taking my delicate hand in his chalk-dusted one. But when my calculations filled my notebook and made my computer heavy, I realized my error. Determinism. We, the teacher and I, would love, or we would hate, or we would

DAVID IRA CLEARY

remember each other as numbing gray montages overlaying the prettier faces of TV, which is the way of most relationships. But we would meet our choice regardless of my scribbles on the paper. Life happens. *Que sera sera*. After I wasted a semester of afternoons, I crumpled my papers and found my next lover.

Determinism. Harry's yell ends my reminiscence. He's behind Felin, applying the Heimlich maneuver, his fists pulling up into Felin's stomach, tearing the frill along the buttons of the shirt. Felin coughs out his lemon; it flies back into his drink. Then he coughs up clear fluid; the puddle around his glass smells more like hydrochloric acid than scotch. Harry lets Felin go, wiping his hands and motioning to the buseperson.

Felin is clearing his throat and looking, as if amazed, at the fluids he has purged.

I thank him and stand, leaving my rosé half finished. I walk away, amazed by my inaction. The equations, it seemed, had me sit and watch. And I was powerless. Yet I am part of the equations, am I not? I think I should be allowed the same measure of control over their calculation as the others have. Harry, Felin; they were able to escape the grind. Wait, I'm confusing myself.

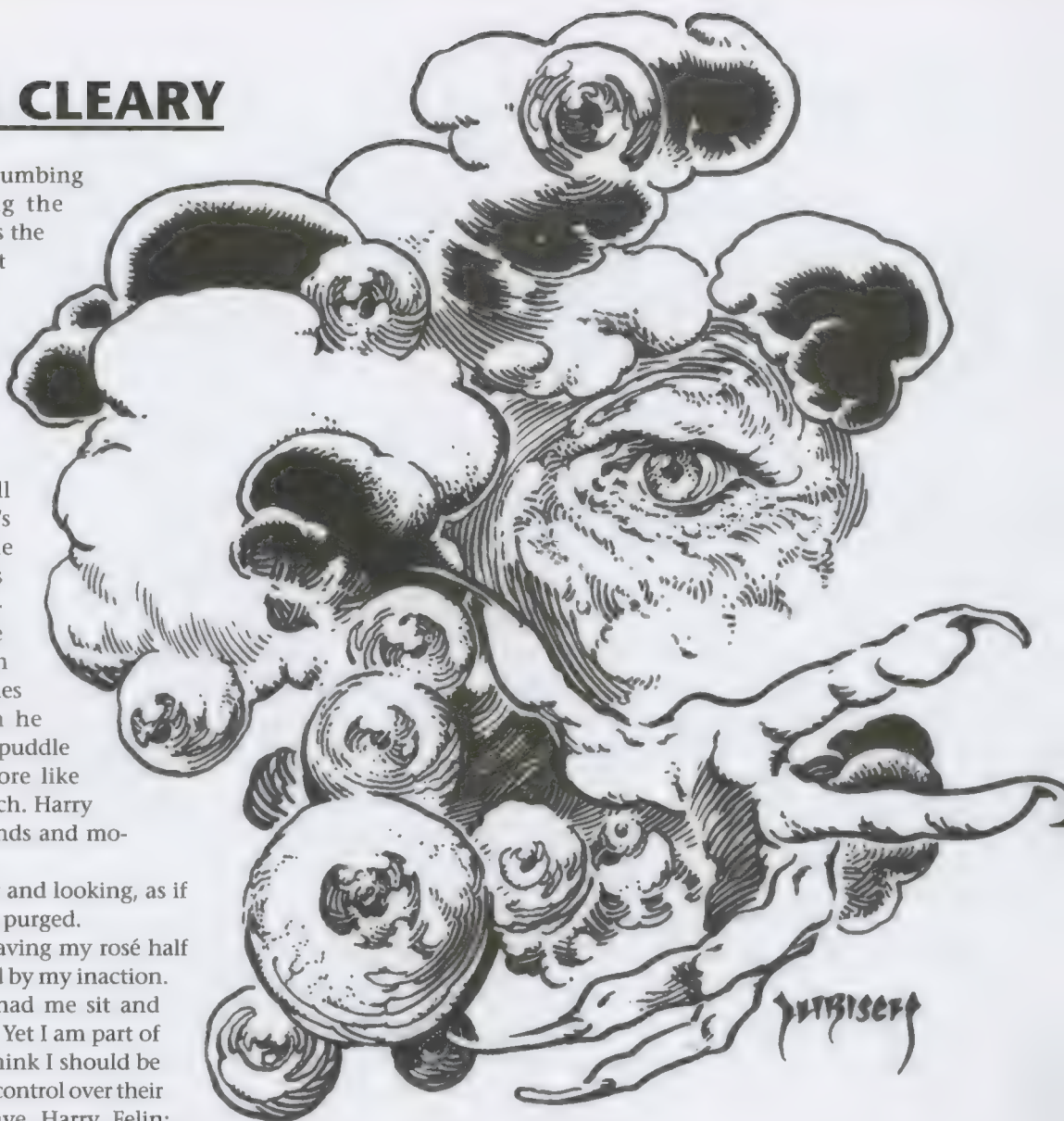
"Hello," I tell my lady friends; they're not playing Calypso Trump today, but rather Catch An Eye. Deborah and Salise and Georgie Ann; they sit around the hexagonal table, making bets on where the LED eye in the middle will look, who it will look at; they barter retina points and focus cards.

"Oh, Tricia, how good to see you," says Salise, blonde but turning white-headed. She motions toward the empty chair on her left, my usual place.

I smile and sit. We begin speaking of the usual things; of the young men, of the competence of the pilots, whether we actually do ever fly so low as to shear the tops of trees, of the austerity of our rooms, of the cheapness of the chandeliers above the tables. Today we do not mention the eyes, as if such an omission will insulate us from their reality. It may not be a good time to speak of Felin.

"Deal," I say. Georgie Ann deals me three metal cards; they slide on their magnetic carriages across the table, over the blinking eye, and come to rest in my collection pocket. I wave my hand over the cards, and they tell me their values: forty-twenty, forty-twenty, forty-ten. The values are my secrets. My cards are not the cards of especially good vision; however, they are adequate. A pair and a loner; if I had a triple, even near-sighted such as these, I would be nearly unstoppable.

Georgie Ann deals to the others; they stare as the cards cross



the table. Salise smirks. Deborah, never good at bluffing, frowns; she must have some nearsighted combination. Then Georgie Ann looks at her own cards; she nods without expression.

The eye blinks faster, its red iris around a pupil that dilates as if it is providing the sight for a speed freak under a spotlight. The dozens of retinas light up around the white of the eye; the winner is going to get them.

"Tricia, you first," Georgie Ann says, and I feel an urgency in the air; a mustiness. Moisture. I turn away from my friends, see the other groups at the tables, see the bathroom doors at the tail end of the plane. Nothing looks different. But I know I felt something. It was . . .

Determinism. Yes; I have no choice; choice is impossible; choice is irrelevant. I cheat. "I have a triple. Twenty-twenty."

Groans from each of the ladies plus a "Shit" from Deborah. Each says, "Pass," at her turn, then gives Georgie Ann her cards. As the cards reach Georgie Ann, I get the retinas. Of course they're not really retinas; just lights on the table; they make a constellation next to my collecting box.

The eye rolls from its vertical position and points to me.

"Okay, Tricia," Georgie Ann says, "Let's see your cards."

I do what the equations say I must: I show them; my three numbers light up, yellow on black, in the strip of plastic between me and the eye: Forty-twenty, forty-twenty, forty-ten. But — "Georgie Ann says.

"Cheat!" says Salise.

"How could you, Tricia?" Deborah demands.

I shrug; it was determinism; actions predetermined a billion billion years before. "Thanks," is all I say; they won't let me play again.

The bell rings softly; time to watch.

I am far to the forward end of the plane this time, almost to the pilot's cabin. I'm on my hands and knees, watching. The eyes are fewer now, but larger; football-size, perhaps, or house-sized. It is hard to tell, because there are no trees in the part of America that we are flying over. Some of the eyes have giant red veins; some have rolled over, so that the broken optic nerve is exposed and flopping in the wind. After a while we do see a few trees, and old roads, and the eyes are, after all, house-sized. One, positioned in the middle of the road, is shaking back and forth at random, as if under the influence of the muscles. REM sleep. Oh, I say 'at random'. Nothing is random; every wink in all the worlds was planned out long ago, was in the equations, susceptible to culling out by a mathematician more adept than I.

Eyes float upward sometimes, as if they are balloons, and the pilot says the jets have occasionally sucked them in. I wonder if that's happening today; the floating, I mean. A few eyes seem to rise, but not very far, as though restrained by invisible tethers.

Oh, no. All right. For an instant, one of them seems to look at me. Staring, coldly. But then it looks away, and I admit I feel foolish. I am giving too much to the lifeless things; these eyes are insensate, stupid. They cannot see. But I mustn't berate myself, because I know even my reactions were programmed long ago into the matrices of the universe. The bell sounds and we find our relief.

I go to my room to sleep, and I dream of eyes, and of eyes attached to heads, and I know in this dream that an eye is nothing but protoplasm made clockwork, as is the rest of the universe: me, Deborah, the pilots, the plane. That is a comforting thought, a good memory.

When I awake, the memory is fading but I use the residues of comfort to balance the new feelings of anxiety. If one should murder, one should expect anxiety. It is a product of sums; four billion years of predictable evolution, plus the equally calculated idiosyncrasies of culture. Simple, unavoidable. Anxiety.

I stretch on the bed and rub my eyes. Then I put on my fine gown and leave, being careful to lock the door. The hallway has pictures of our plane painted on the walls, as if the artist were decorating a small boy's bedroom. There are also pictures of much smaller planes – 767s, Spitfires, the Wright Brothers' toy. They all fly over America in the picture, one would suppose, but it's difficult to tell whether the smudge of green at the bottom of the walls is intended to represent trees or oceans or very old people.

Deborah lives next door. I don't hesitate; one cannot buck destiny. I knock, and she opens the door a crack. "Oh, Tricia." Her voice is strained; her eyes are tired.

"Hello, Deborah. Aren't you going to let me in?"

"I don't know. To tell the truth, I'm still mad at you."

"Why?"

She unfastens the lock and opens the door the rest of the way; she's wearing a heavy polyester robe, and has white cleansing cream smeared onto her face.

"Why? You know why. You cheated."

"I'm sorry." For I am, because that is the way the electrons would have it.

"Come on in, then. It'll be good to talk about it, I suppose."

I follow her inside; she indicates her couch, one on which we've spent many hours discussing the boys and sipping cafe noir. "I'll get coffee," she says. She walks through the swinging saloon-style doors to her kitchen.

I don't sit. There is just enough room for me to back against the wall between the grandfather clock and the swinging door. I reach into my pocket and take out my graphite industrial-strength wire. It's cold and sharp in my hands. I make a loop.

She bumps her way through the doors, then stops. "Tricia?" She takes two steps into the living room, the coffee on a tray ahead of her.

I'm like a player piano: I obey the electrons, the heavy particles, the nuclear forces. I step up to her from behind. She drops the tray as I bring the loop of wire down around her head.

"Uhhp!"

She hits ineffectually at my legs and tries to twist around. Her mouth is open and her eyes are wide, reminding me of Felin. I pull harder, so that she moves back against me, so that the wire digs into her neck, looking less like a noose and more like a tight, bloody necklace. She makes strange noises as her face darkens.

After two minutes she stops struggling. I give one more tug to the wire, just to make sure, then let her go.

She falls to the side of her coffee tray. The china cups and server have fallen over, making a dark pool on the tray and staining the carpet. Freed from the cups the smell is especially potent; the protein molecules fly into the air, obeying their program, interacting with the clockwork of my own body, the machines of my awareness.

Inevitably, I feel weariness replace anxiety. I leave Deborah's room, quietly shutting the door, then I return to my own bed. I lie down, letting my head sink into my chiffon pillow, succumbing to sleep.

They find the corruption in Deborah's room and know that I, teleologically speaking, am its cause. What most do not understand is that they, too, are the causes. Their masses gave *this* gravitational pull to my arm; the electrical fields in their bodies put *that* electro-chemical twist into my brain. They contributed to the murder just as I did, though I admit their part is the lesser. The cubic laws of proximity: spheres and dancing charges. But I was the courageous one, wasn't I? I held the wire in my bloody hands.

I see Felin again, today, as we crawl about the glass bottom of the plane; it has a slight curve, which rises dramatically to form the wall at the side of the plane, where the white pipes and rheostats are placed, the mechanisms which help insure the health of the passengers of the plane. Because the machinery is intricate and not especially pleasing to the eye, we usually avoid it as we watch. But, because I sense the others' displeasure with my actions, I back up against it, the spike heels of my shoes sliding between the hoses.

Felin is about four meters away. He's the closest to me and doing a damn poor job of watching – he keeps glancing at me, as if to decipher the shadows inside the hanging folds of my cocktail dress. Then he plays at the watch, putting his red nose close to the glass, then crawling in a quick semicircle, as if he's looking for a contact lens. But he draws no closer. I think I understand.

I smile at him, then look down at the eyes. They pass silently below us, as would stars seen from a spacedeck. Lit only by the moon, the pupils are unnaturally constricted, as if awash

in isoptocarpine. The eyes do seem to be in a fluid; they tumble, thickly, bouncing off one another and trailing detritus from their collisions. Sometimes they are so thick we can't see the folds of earth below, the mountains of America on which they gather.

A group of eyes, clustered like grapes, stares at me.

I look up, tense, scratching my long fingernails into the glass. My heart is racing.

Felin is looking away; I bet he was looking down my dress again. I crawl to him, homing towards his hair. It is white, now, but I imagine that it was red when he was younger. I will not look at the eyes. for the moment.

There is a meter between us and he pretends an avid interest in the eyes. "Hey, Felin."

He doesn't look at me; there are brown spots like continents on his forehead. "Eyes are impossible. I'm convinced."

"You fool," I whisper.

He looks up at me; his smile is one of love, one of fear, improbably mated. He tongs his dentures carefully into place. "The brain, too. Impossible. And sickle cell. Have you ever considered sickle cell? One gene: protection from malaria. Two genes: oxygen starvation, death. Evolution? Impossible."

He looks down again. "Felin, is love an impossibility, too?"

"It's too late."

"Are you sure?" I balance myself on my left arm, puffy because of my weakening heart, then brush my fingers across his lips.

"Suppose not," he says. "Guess it was coming." I smile. Could it be that even Felin, with his specious reasoning, understands the irresistibility of the equations? Perhaps determinism is easier to see when it shapes the vision of our daily lives, rather than the less available visions of the past.

The bell tolls.

Felin helps me up, then we walk hand in hand across the glass. The others make a path for us, avoiding my eyes, whispering among themselves. Ahead is the middle of the plane, the line down the center that divides the window glass from the quarters and the entertainment section. It is one step from the glass to the carpeted floor.

"My place, huh?" Felin says.

"Sure," I say, as I trip him. My aim is accurate; he falls so his head is above the step. He catches himself so that he doesn't break his nose. But both his brittle arms crack.

"Oh, God, God," he mumbles.

I sit down on his back, taking his hair in my hands. The weaker white strands come out but there's enough remaining to allow me to raise his head and ram his face against the step. I do this repeatedly, his cartilage crunching, his old bones breaking, his hair slickening.

Isn't he as responsible for his death as am I?

My actions are well received; I have made a perturbation in the pleasant air, but all adjust their lives to accommodate me: some arrive earlier at the meal hours, some later, avoiding, as the punchcards of the universe would permit, my presence. My friends Georgie Ann and Salise continue to play their games, but they need a third partner and, not allowing me to return, let a computer in a briefcase sit in. I sometimes sit at the table where Felin once courted me, and nurse a rum and cola. I foolishly wish that I had my paper and pencil, so that I could attempt the calculations: the vectors, the line integrals, the Gaussian spaces. I want to see the numbers that make the people act, so that I can understand their belief in my actions. But, of course, I would only be frustrated if I had the pencil.

The fact that a deterministic universe operates without some invisible hand to calculate the states is more than a curiosity, more than a joke. It shows that numbers are irrelevant. That there is a mechanistic substrate unknowable and ancient. So I'm content to dip my paper napkin in my drink, let the stain rise. When the napkin is wet I can tear a hole in it and spy on Georgie Ann and Salise, far off at their gaming table. They watch me, too.

The edicts of the past make me do this. I bludgeon Salise in the hallway until the beige carpet turns red. While Georgie Ann's taking a bath I throw electric fish into the tub; the bubbles on the water hiss and crackle as her white hair writhes and smokes. People in the hallways, one, two; I use a knife stolen from the kitchen, I use a rusty pipe, taken from a supply room in the far reaches of the plane.

Again, we watch, as we fly over America. Daytime and the white clouds are like the luxurious locks of a healthy old woman. The eyes are seen for an instant, then lower clouds, puffy and gray, circle in and cover them up. Clouds, too, follow a deterministic path; their soft substance plays a small part in my actions, as my cells do in theirs. If this seems absurd, I have read that an electron in another galaxy can nudge a billiard ball from the initial geometry of its course. All the stars assist me in my actions. And my molecules help them decide the instant that each group of atoms fuses.

Determinism.

I have thirty square meters of glass to myself; some people fear to attend the watch. Because of me. No matter; the pilots don't care, and the cloud cover is so heavy now it is just an ocean of white.

Wait. Ahead, I see a break. No, it is just another cloud formation, lower, resting in a cleft in the higher sea. It is large, curved, reminding me of my professor's balding head, because the higher clouds make earlike shadows.

It is a long way off but we cover half a kilometer a second. I think sometimes I can see the shadow of the plane on the clouds. We're above the formation. It is an eye, a giant eye. The clouds break completely, moving away from the eye. It is larger than a mountain, perfectly round, and I can see all the major veins and arteries, channeling beneath its surface, though it isn't bloodshot.

We are beginning to circle it; the lens is a dome above the dilating pupil and the hazel iris. I can see the plane's reflection on one side of the lens, the sun's on the other. Both are small.

I wish we weren't circling the eye; I would like to get up from the glass and yell at the pilots, but I suspect I will not; we will continue to circle the eye, for days, for nights.

But it's so big, and now it warps in the slight way they do, as the invisible muscles at the sides contract and loosen. The pupil moves, then begins to rotate. It accelerates and soon matches the circling plane, revolution for revolution. The reflection of the plane is now on the very tip of the lens. It is watching us.

No; I understand. It is watching me. I want to jump up and run to my room but that, by the physical rules of the universe, is impossible. So I'll kneel here and watch it as it watches me, until the plane changes course. But even if we change, I know the eye will follow me.

Determinism.

David is perhaps best known for his 'Jaromir Stavan' series of stories, most of which were published in *SF Age*, with one, 'The Transcendentalists', making it to the preliminary Nebula ballot. Watch out for 'One Day in Time City' in a future *Interzone*.



WILL McINTOSH

TOTEMS

with artwork by Edward Hooch

A

bell rang from inside a shed-sized concrete temple tucked in one corner of the square. Tangles of rusted barbed wire hung at ineffective intervals along a high brick wall beyond the temple, intended to keep out the homeless, who were lying listlessly in stingy strips of shade.

Next to the temple a thin, barefoot old man sat cross-legged under a tin roof supported by an ancient red and yellow striped pole that had probably looked festive at one time.

Jeria approached the old man, who smiled, displaying brown teeth.

"Are you Ruplu?" Jerea asked.

"Ruplu. Ya." He smiled wider, exposing a black toothless gap.

Jerea pulled three photos of totems out of her breast pocket and showed them to Ruplu. "You have one? Like these?"

Ruplu pointed at the photos. He nodded. Jerea's heart started pounding.

"Where?"

"Sanjay," he said, pointing vaguely. He stood in one fluid motion, grabbed Jerea's arm and led her down the street.

Jerea wondered how this poverty-stricken man had gotten one of the totems. Even someone who couldn't recognize the breathtaking artistic quality of the work could recognize that it was an artifact from offworld. Even a dried bug from offworld had value.

Ruplu led her out of the courtyard, down a narrow, winding street. The heavy air was filled with conversations shouted between screenless windows. Somewhere a car cranked weakly, the engine not close to turning over.

Ruplu pulled her through a doorway, into a dark junk shop. Jerea closed her eyes for a second, allowing them to adjust, then looked around. There wasn't much in the shop. Scuffed DVDs, a stained print of Ganesh, crockery, silverware, all lying in heaps on the floor and on cheap particleboard shelves.

Ruplu spoke rapid Tamil to a thin man with a big belly and pockmarked face who sat behind a plywood counter. Too fast for Jerea to follow.

"You are interested in the tree god statue, he tells me," Sanjay said in bouncy Indo-British.

She tried to keep her voice steady. "Yes. Can I see it please?" Without another word he headed toward the back of the store, his loose sandals slapping the concrete floor. Jerea followed, Ruplu close behind her. Sanjay disappeared through a grey curtain. He reappeared a moment later, holding the totem.

"Oh!" Jerea said, gingerly taking it from Sanjay. She turned the seafoam green totem in circles to ensure it was whole, that the seam had not been tampered with. Wood from the towering ten-thousand-year-old Twill tree was hardy, but not indestructible.

The totem was undamaged. It was a male figure, dressed in flowing robes that bled into a cobweb of roots that anchored the figure to its base. The figure had the long, lithe, fragile build of the Everling; the face was narrow and angled and, to Jerea, beautiful.

Jerea paid Sanjay's asking price without bargaining. Likely Sanjay thought his asking price was outrageous, but Jerea would have paid ten times as much. A thousand times if necessary.

Outside she handed Ruplu 2,000 rupees. He grinned, touched the bills to his forehead in thanks. She bowed slightly, then headed toward a main street, hugging the totem to her chest.

"I'll take you home," she whispered. "You're safe now." She lifted the totem, pressed her lips to the figure's head.

"I'm home!" she called as she threw open the front door, the new totem tucked in the crook of her elbow. The airy vestibule was lined with totems. Each was different – some were men, some women. They were sitting, standing, reaching toward the sky, running, contemplating, laughing, dancing.

In the living room, even more totems, lined shoulder to shoulder on rows of shelves, crowding table tops, tucked into corners on the floor.

"Are you moving again?" She paused to separate a group that were packed into a tight bunch in one corner of the room. "How come you never let me see you moving?"

Jerea bounded through her house, silently greeting them

all, holding out her newest discovery so they could welcome him, occasionally pausing to adjust one that had drifted out of its spot.

She found a space for the newest addition on an end table in the music room, between a woman lying on her back playing a dweethill and a man praying to his essence. She stroked the gaunt cheek of the man. "You sense me, I know you do," she whispered. "That's why you move."

Back in the kitchen she pulled a pen from her pen cup and consulted the tally, taped to the inside of a cabinet door. The bottom number, the only one without a line through it, was 54. She drew a line through 54, and wrote 53 below it. 280 down, 53 to go.

She grabbed a plastic-wrapped package of stale nan bread and a jar of mango chutney and went to her computer to continue the search. Maybe the ads she'd posted had unearthed another lead.

Jerea couldn't eat on the flight back to Earth, not a bite during the thirty hour trip. She smiled, thinking how Clif-mon teased her for being so thin and gangly, the closest a human ever came to an Everling physique, he'd say. Every time a member of the flight crew walked by, her stomach twisted, though she knew no one would be checking her cargo during the flight. Customs presented the real danger.

She closed her eyes and pictured Clif-mon, his goldenrod strings swimming in the air around him.

She hurried from the transport as soon as it landed, tried to stay cool in customs as she underwent the body scan and interview. As she and Clif-mon had surmised, screening was far laxer in New Delhi than it would have been in London, Shanghai, or Atlanta – the other return sites for travelers to Everling.

Import license and packing list in hand, she headed to the loading dock outside to claim her merchandise.

A smiling commerce officer in a brown uniform looked at her receipt, invited her to take a seat, motioning to a line of decrepit wooden benches along a damp concrete wall.

She waited, and waited. Beyond the stone wall that separated the loading dock from the city, she heard the hum and clatter of vehicles, the sandpaper cries of crows, or maybe buzzards. She longed to be out there, safe with the totems.

"Patience. Clearing off-world merchandise takes time, it is not something we do every day," the commerce officer said when she stopped him once. She waited quietly after that. She didn't want to seem overanxious, didn't want to raise suspicions. Her mouth was dry, her throat tight.

Finally, a clerk called her name. She sprang from the bench, followed the clerk to a spot on the dock where five crates were stacked against a rusting steel beam.

"Where are the rest?" she asked.

The clerk shrugged. "This is all." Jerea's vision greyed around the edges; the platform tilted sickly.

The clerk turned to leave. Jerea lurched after him. "Wait! There are more . . . there should be thirty-three!" She stumbled, recovered, caught up to the clerk and grabbed his arm. "There were thirty-three!"

The clerk pointed without slowing. "Speak to the commerce officer."

Jerea ran after the commerce officer, who was walking with a fat man in a suit.

"Calm down. Everything will get sorted out," the commerce officer assured her, patting her shoulder.

Jerea couldn't catch her breath. A hitching squeal accom-

panied each inhale, as if she were breathing through a plastic straw. She started to cry, which made the squeal worse.

"Come, come, lie down," the commerce officer said, grasping her elbow and leading her into his office, to a black couch. When she was settled he turned to leave; Jerea clutched at his sleeve. He shushed her, gently disengaged her hand, and left, closing the glass door behind him. Jerea struggled to her feet and went after him.

If customs in New Delhi had caught them, the back-up plan was to bribe everyone in sight. Jerea carried half a million rupees in cash in case backsheesh proved necessary. Over the course of the following weeks she paid out much of that money to officials who promised to help her recover the totems. None delivered on their promise.

The totems were gone, stolen. New Delhi's biggest strength as a smuggling target, its laxness, turned out to be its biggest weakness. Officials could be bought by local thieves just as easily as by off-world smugglers.

From: Bryant B. Jennings
To: Jerea Kimball
RE: Everling totems!

Dear Ms Kimball,

Evidently we have the same passion! I did not know that anyone else was collecting Everling totems. I stumbled on one in an art gallery in Puri, and ever since have been hunting for them. Clearly they were first dispersed in India, though I've located some in Pakistan, China, even one in the US! I have 22 in my collection. How many do you have? I'm not interested in selling, but I would like to meet with another enthusiast, perhaps trade? Do you know anything of their origin? I've gathered quite a bit of information about their significance on Everling that I'd be happy to share with you! I'm an American art appraiser, living in Bombay. I'll be in Calcutta on business next week. Shall we meet?

Your fellow aesthete,
Bryant

Jerea spotted Bryant as soon as he walked into the dimly lit restaurant. He was an ugly man, thick lipped and unkempt. He scanned the tables until he spotted Jerea, duck-walked to her table and held out his hand. He clutched a photo album in the other.

"Jerea, I presume? Very nice to meet you." His grip was slippery and off-center. Godawful Hindi music blared from speakers in the ceiling.

Bryant sat across from her and immediately launched into a loud recitation on Everling history and philosophy. A slew of nervous habits surfaced as he grew excited – his head jerked spasmodically toward his right shoulder; he sniffed loudly, cleared his throat constantly. When the waiter came, Bryant muttered that he didn't want anything and waived the waiter away without looking up. Occasionally Jerea wedged a word or two into the conversation. Bryant seemed to make an effort to listen to her, but usually interrupted before she could finish.

She listened for a polite length of time, then said, "Can I see the photos?"

Bryant dragged his chair around the table next to Jerea and opened the black archival album. Four photos, perfectly spaced, filled the first page. All were of genuine Everling totems: a healer with arms spread; a runner, her long legs in full stride; a landscape engineer; an artist carving.

"It's clear that one artist created them all. I think this one

is particularly well-executed." Bryant pointed at the runner.

Jerea gently tugged the album from Bryant's hands, began leafing through the pages. Twenty-two. He had twenty-two of the remaining fifty-three. Bryant kept talking, pointing toward swiftly passing photos.

Finally he grasped one side of the book and pulled. Reluctantly, Jerea let go. He continued his recitation. There was a buzzing in Jerea's ears, so loud she could barely hear Bryant.

"You have to let me buy these from you," she interrupted. "They're very important to me. I – I knew the artist."

"What?" Bryant cried, his eyes lighting up. "You met him? An Everling? Tell me, tell me! How did they get here?"

She told him about Clif-mon. She left out the smuggling, and the fact that she loved him, and the truth about the totems.

Dressed in flowing black robes, Jerea made her entrance to enthusiastic applause. She held her head high, raised a hand dramatically to acknowledge the audience. She hated the theatrics, but attitude was part of the performance.

Her cello was propped beside an exquisitely carved antique bench covered in rich burgundy. She lifted the cello, kissed it gently. The applause swelled. She soaked in the crowd's energy, felt her pulse quicken in anticipation of the performance.

Then the applause faltered, was overtaken by murmurs. Jerea looked around, confused. She followed stares up, to her right, to a balcony box. For a moment she didn't understand what she was seeing. A towering figure dressed in yellow robes that glinted with reflected light stood staring down at her. The figure was inhumanly tall, improbably thin.

An Everling, she realized. What in the world was an Everling doing at her recital? It must be an unplanned activity, or she would have been given notice. She felt self-conscious under the alien's stare.

She nodded to him, and he nodded back. The seats were too low for him, so he remained standing as the audience took their seats.

Composing herself, Jerea swept her robes to one side and sat on the bench. She lifted her bow, lowered her head toward the strings, and drew the bow across them. She launched into Pasanante's Triptych, a far more challenging piece than she had planned for her opening. If an Everling was going to hear her play, he was going to hear her best.

A roar of whispers swept through the hall. Jerea glanced toward her unexpected guest, and almost dropped her bow.

He was dancing. Jerea knew of the Everlings' affinity for movement, but seeing it – it was overwhelming, almost more than she could stand. His fluid, rhythmic motion was indescribably alien, yet described her music perfectly. His shimmering goldenrod robes were laced with thousands of dangling strips that rippled with each movement.

Everyone stared. Jerea stared, enthralled by the Everling, inspired by his beauty to take the Triptych further than it had ever been taken. The audience roared as she deviated from the composition, shifting the tempo, improvising new themes. The Everling responded to her, and, she realized, also drew her in certain directions, making musical suggestions with his movements. His eyes were locked on hers. She felt herself let go, into that timeless, bodiless place that musicians always seek but rarely find.

The duet went on and on – Jerea didn't want it to end, did not want to shatter the perfection, the blissful flow.

When she finally set her bow down, she had no idea how much time had passed. The audience roared a solid wall of sound. Jerea swept her hand toward the Everling in recognition

of his contribution, and he in turn bowed to her.

Backstage, Jerea accepted accolades graciously, one eye on the door. The room crackled with energy, as if it were a rock concert rather than a classical recital.

She was on her second glass of wine when the Everling appeared, bending almost vertically to clear the doorway. He scanned the crowd, spotted Jerea, came toward her. He moved so wonderfully, as if his body were water and wind, not skin and meat. His long arms, seemingly thin as a heron's legs, swung like cantilevers.

"That was brilliant," he said as he reached her. "You have a profound understanding of the nature of things." His voice was crystal tenor. His pronunciation excellent, his cadence odd and beautiful.

"Thank you," Jerea said. "Your dancing . . . I don't have words to describe how deeply it touched me." Up close his face looked both ancient and youthful. His eyes were large and almond-shaped, his face long and gaunt. Somehow it reminded Jerea of a lion's face.

"My name is Clif-mon." He extended his hand. The strings dangling from the arm of his robe danced. His grip was light, ethereal – like shaking hands with a ghost.

Clif-mon was an artist, visiting Earth to learn more of human art in all its forms. He asked her a dozen intriguing questions, until his human escort interrupted, reminding him of an architectural tour of the city that was scheduled with the director of the London Chamber of Commerce.

"Ah, buildings, yes. How wonderfully blocky and inanimate they are," the Everling said, unmistakably sarcastic. He turned to Jerea, smiled at her with his lipless mouth. "Would you save me from this? As one artist to another?"

"How can I help?" Jerea asked, bemused.

"Serve as my artistic guide for a day. Show me your people's beauty."

Jerea laughed. Clif-mon's escort opened his mouth to protest, but stopped himself. She shrugged. "Why not?"

"Excellent!" Abruptly Clif-mon thanked his flustered escort, swept his arm toward the door. "Shall we?" Jerea led the way through the crowd.

Outside, Jerea looked up and down the noisy London street, trying to decide what the Everling might want to see. All around them people stopped, traffic slowed at the sight of Clif-mon. Only the pigeon pecking at pebbles by his foot seemed unaffected.

"So, no Houses of Parliament?"

He laughed – a dry chuckle that merged into the thumping of a passing helicopter. "No thank you. Show me art, music, people moving gracefully. I've seen flat-screen images of human sport. It would interest me to see it in three dimensions." His cadence was stranger out here – he seemed to be harmonizing with the sound of traffic wooshing by, the bleating of horns.

Jerea pulled out her computer and consulted it. "You're in luck. Arsenal are playing Manchester United this afternoon."

She led him toward a tube station, basking in the reflected beauty of her companion as people stopped and stared.

"You move so beautifully," she said as she walked, and he glided, down concrete stairs leading to the underground.

Clif-mon laughed delightedly. "It's difficult for me to move in unity with your world. I'm not part of it. Well, of course I am, I'm here. But its rhythms are unfamiliar, and, if you don't mind me saying, the unifying threads are masked here – your people don't cultivate them. Of course all is interconnected here as everywhere, but your connections are unkempt."

Jerea shook her head, unable to follow the Everling's point.

She was familiar with Everling philosophy, but evidently not familiar enough.

"If you came to Everling you would understand."

"Oh, I've seen video of it. It's breathtaking!"

"Flat screen images are not enough, you must be there to feel the harmony."

"I don't understand why you won't trade with me," Bryant said. He wandered from one corner of Jerea's living room to the coffee table, anxiously lifted a totem of a nude Everling woman. He cleared his throat loudly, twitched his head, once, twice. "I think my offer is more than fair. I understand that the artist is a personal friend of yours, but I appreciate his work, too."

"I have to have them all," Jerea said.

Bryant frowned. "I'm sorry you feel that way."

"Please, Bryant." She squatted next to him, took one of his hands in hers, looked into his face. He glanced at her for a second, then away. He sniffed.

"I'll give you whatever you want. *Anything*." She wasn't sure if he understood what she was saying, wasn't even sure she meant what she was insinuating. But she knew Bryant had a crush on her, in his awkward way. Maybe that's why he was holding on to the totems, as leverage to spend time with her.

"Anything," she repeated, and started to cry.

Startled, Bryant patted her on the shoulder. The head-jerks got worse.

Through the blur of her tears the totem that Bryant clutched looked even more stretched than usual.

"But why should you get to have them *all*? I don't understand why we can't trade, so we can have different ones to admire." Jerea cried harder. "Well. I guess we'll just have to agree to disagree. No hard feelings?"

Jerea nodded, forced a trembling smile. She couldn't afford to push Bryant too hard while he had the totems.

"Keep your eyes closed," Clif-mon prodded excitedly. He must have gotten the idea watching some film or TV show on Earth. Jerea stumbled along, Clif-mon pulling her by the wrist.

All around she could hear the music of Twill trees. The perfect-pitched trilling rose and fell in waves, first from one direction, then another, as if calling and answering across the landscape. The air smelled like cinnamon. Then a moment later it smelled closer to sweet cut grass.

"All right, stop here." He turned her slightly. "Open your eyes."

Jerea cried out. Though she'd watched a hundred videos of Everling, she realized they'd shown her nothing.

Form and space, color and movement in a perfect, seamless tapestry. It was a work of art – the entire landscape was a masterpiece.

There was very little flat ground – it undulated in huge waves, falling away unexpectedly, shooting upward toward towering peaks. Clumped in bunches here and there were Twill trees, their multicolored leaves shimmering in the breeze. The music, coming from the leaves colliding in the light breeze, was in perfect complement with the shimmering cyan, lavender, and lemon leaves, reminding Jerea of her duet with Clif-mon the day they met.

Clif-mon watched her face, smiling with pride.

High in the mountains, far above the highest bridge, huge billowing sheets stretched across the sky, some of them burnt orange, others deep blue, pink, scarlet. They filtered sunlight, creating colored space that crisscrossed both in the air and on

the soft, mossy turf.

Clif-mon followed her gaze. "See the colorful winged creatures that look like the leaves on the trees?" She followed his pointing finger, saw that some of the leaves were flying about from tree to tree. "They're called tree-winks. They spin silk in the color of their wings – they make those tapestries that diffuse the light. Space, light, color, sound, movement, all are in balance. Can you feel it?"

She could. She felt calm, yet elated. Her anxiety at being on a strange world fell away. The muscles in her face were relaxed and tingling; her breathing came easily, as if adhesions in her lungs had been torn away.

"Yes, I can feel it," she said.

"Within and without are one and same," he whispered, his voice reverent. "I will teach you how to move here, if you wish."

"I'd like that," Jerea said. "But first I have to get my cello, and play for a while."

When she drew the bow across the strings the Twill trees answered. Or perhaps it was she who was answering them – cause and effect blurred, became irrelevant.

A handful of Everlings settled on the moss to listen. They sat facing away from her, toward the mountains. Clearly they liked what they heard, because soon they were dancing, but all of them faced away as they danced. Except Clif-mon, who stood close by, and whose eyes never left hers.

When Jerea told her mother she was in love with an Everling, her mother replied, simply, "That's disgusting." Others were more diplomatic, but most would not have disagreed. Everlings were strange and beautiful, but beautiful like a sunset, or a leaf drifting on a breeze. You don't fall in love with a sunset. A sunset, like an Everling, has no heart, no lips.

Jerea's visa was for three months, the maximum allowed for a cultural exchange. Earth was interested in trading goods with Everling, Everling in artistic and cultural exchange. Neither was interested in exchanging citizens.

Ever since the Xeno Flu swept through Europe, fear of off-world immigration was irrationally high. With the rising prominence of the Terrans First party in many countries, immigration had become virtually impossible. There was no way an Everling, an artist at that, would be allowed to stay on Earth. Even a three-month visa involved miles of red tape.

Everlings' issues with humans were different. They found humans . . . uneven and awkward.

"Yes," Clif-mon confessed, "Most Everlings feel that they pay an esthetic price for your presence here. They would never let you stay permanently."

"That's why they face the other direction when I play," Jerea said.

"Yes," Clif-mon said.

They sat with limbs entwined in a chartreuse silk-web hammock that stretched to the high ceiling. The web crossed the wide, screenless window, filtering the sunlight to a soft lime.

The room, cradled high in a giant cucuru tree, was mostly living – butterscotch-colored vines groomed to a tight weave comprised the walls; a soft silver moss grew on the floor.

"What about you? Are you repulsed by my relative bulk and elephantine lack of grace?" Jerea asked.

Clif-mon chuckled. "The way you move is unsightly. But your essence is expressed in your music, and that essence is beautiful." He stroked her black hair with his long fingers. "Besides, I love you. I can't say why, but that doesn't make it

any less an expression of harmony."

"I can't imagine going back, picking up my old life without you. It's intolerable, the idea is intolerable," Jerea said. She pressed her face against his shoulder.

Clif-mon made a thumping sound deep in his throat, indicating he shared her feelings deeply.

An evanloo sang in the distance. Its tone seemed plaintive, as if it, too, shared their feelings deeply.

"There may be a way," Clif-mon said.

Jerea waited, hopeful.

"I could stow away on the transport," he said.

Jerea's heart sank. "You could never make it through the security checks. They scan *everything* for signs of plant and animal life, and nothing is released without a tracking biotag."

Clif-mon nodded. "I know. I looked into it. The scanners are so sensitive they'll even detect an Everling's raw, unhoused essence –"

Jerea shook her head, confused. "What do you mean 'unhoused'?"

He ignored the question. "But it can't detect small traces of essence."

"I'll give you this house, straight up. It's paid for." She watched him as she sipped coffee from a ceramic mug.

Bryant chuckled. "You never give up, do you?"

"Nope."

"I don't *need* your house. I inherited enough from my father to keep me comfortable for the rest of my life."

Jerea nodded. "I know." His inheritance probably dwarfed what was in the trust fund her grandmother had left her, substantial as that was. She stared into her mug, swirled the coffee till it threatened to spill over the lip. The bubbles on the surface coalesced in a tight circle in the eye of the whirlpool. "Okay, I'm going to tell you something. But it can never leave this room."

"Go ahead, take it, it's all right," Clif-mon cooed, pressing the white dagger into Jerea's hand. "This is a beautiful thing. You can't imagine what it means to me that it's you who is liberating my essence."

Naked, he climbed onto the polished stone table and lay flat, arms at his sides. He smiled up at her, nodded once, closed his eyes. "I'll see you soon."

Jerea looked at the knife. She was reminded of seventh grade biology lab, when she had to prick her lab partner's finger with a tiny lance to do blood-typing. Twice she'd poked his finger tentatively, pricking his skin, but not hard enough to draw blood. Jerea's lab partner had finally lanced his own finger when the teacher wasn't looking, then he'd pricked Jerea's with one swift poke.

Jerea raised the dagger, both hands gripping the smooth, undulating hilt. She visualized the blade coming down, plunging into his thin white chest. She couldn't, absolutely could not do this.

"Please," Clif-mon whispered, his eyes still closed.

She lifted the blade higher. Whimpering, she stabbed downward, then stopped short.

Outside, a breeze lit over a copse of Twill trees. The leaves collided gently, filling the air with their music.

Jerea raised the knife and slammed it home before she could think about what she was doing. She screamed as the dagger sank as if into a ripe melon. A barking laugh burst from Clif-mon. His arms and legs jerked three, four, five times. Still screaming, she dragged the knife down his chest as he'd taught

her. Blue-green blood welled in the massive wound as she sliced him open. Finally, Clif-mon stopped moving. He exhaled. A blue-green bubble formed in his mouth, quivered, popped.

Whimpering, hands trembling, she sawed open his chest – one long cut crossed by two horizontal ones. His fragile ribs split like wishbones. His blood, which covered her hands to the wrist, smelled like ammonia and cucumbers. She kept her gaze on his torso, avoiding his face. She did not want to look at his face.

She peeled back his chest. Amid the strange organs twisting inside him she found a preternaturally bright goldenrod-colored blob, just as he'd said. She grasped it in both hands, worked it out. It was heavy, with the consistency of gelatin. She cradled it against her chest like a child, set it gently inside the Twillwood bowl set beside Clif-mon, beside his body. She carried the bowl across the room to the army of totems that Clif-mon had carved and split in two. She knelt, laid the two halves of the first totem on the stone floor.

Clif-mon's essence was warm. Jerea pinched it, pulled until a dollop popped free. She lay the blood-stained dollop of Clif-mon in the hollow he'd carved out of the center of the totem, a half-circle the size of a half-marble. She painted the edges of the totem with Twill sap, then lay the other half of the totem over it. Later she would disguise the seam with the pitch Clif-mon had prepared.

"All right," Bryant said, nodding somberly. "I'll give them to you. For nothing."

"Oh, no I couldn't – " Jerea started, then stopped herself. Yes, she could. She threw her arms around Bryant. "Thank you. Thank you so much." She sobbed.

"But you have to promise me something," Bryant said into her shoulder.

"Sure. What?"

"You'll include me in the hunt for the rest. Promise you won't forget about me if I give you my totems."

Jerea smiled. "You're going to help me? Really? That would be great."

"I wouldn't know what to do with my free time if I wasn't totem-hunting," Bryant said. He tried to say it casually, but there was an undertone of desperation.

Jerea went to the kitchen to retrieve her purse. "Can you book us a speed-rail to Bombay? I won't sleep now until the totems are safely home."

On the tally sheet, Jerea drew a line through 53, and wrote 31 below it. She stared at the number for a minute, then looked at the sheet of paper taped above the tally sheet. It was a list of ingredients – simple things: eggs, seaweed, nuts, sponge . . . a gram of gold, two ounces of petroleum, and so on. Everling soup; the raw material Clif-mon's essence would use to resurrect him. Hard to believe that's all it would take once she reunited his essence. She closed the cabinet door. She was so much closer now.

"Why do they move?" Bryant asked quietly. There were totems all around his feet, and one in his lap – a woman with a tree-wink on her open palm. He traced the smooth curve in her robe with a pasty, graceless finger.

Jerea looked up, surprised. Bryant had never mentioned them moving before. She'd assumed they only moved for her.

"I don't know. Some part of Clif-mon's essence must sense us."

"Is he aware? Does he have thoughts?"

"No. The essence is only potential. That's how Clif-mon put it."

Bryant nodded. Now he was petting the totem's head as if it were a puppy. His corduroy trousers were two inches too short, exposing thick black socks.

"How were you planning to avoid detection once Clif-mon was resurrected?"

"Once I've reunited his essence I'm going to take it to Brazil, to the rain forest, and resurrect him there. We'll live there, very simply. Even if there was no question of detection, we'd want to live somewhere natural and harmonious."

"Shall we continue the hunt tomorrow?"

Jerea nodded. "Sounds good."

Bryant stood, stretched his arms over his head. "I'm yours till the tenth, then I have some consulting work I have to do in Morocco, for Sotheby's."

"That's perfect timing. I'm on tour for a month starting on the twelfth." She stood, gave Bryant a hug. "Thank you. You're a good friend."

Bryant nodded, patted Jerea's back. "You're welcome." He wandered into Jerea's guest room, closed the door. Jerea sat in silence with the totems.

Clif-mon carved like he danced. His diamond knife caressed the block of Twillwood, slicing here, nicking there. Clif-mon seemed more interested in the movement of hand and light than in the emerging figure, yet each figure slowly came to life until it sparkled with vitality.

Jerea tried to capture in music the young sleeping woman he was carving. She closed her eyes, pictured the woman in a field of mintcream. Soft, humming whispers drifted from her cello. The music she played on Everling was altogether different from her Earth music. It was like nothing she had ever heard on Earth. She wondered if she would be able to play it on Earth. Everling made the music possible – it was a collaboration. If she published it on Earth, she would have to give Everling, the whole planet, coauthor status. She smiled at the thought.

She watched Clif-mon. He buffed the young dreamer with a black cloth. His eyes were always alert – they never drifted into mindless reverie. He was always here with her, fully present. They didn't talk much, yet each day they knew each other more deeply. She stopped playing.

"If you had fallen in love with an Everling woman, would it be similar to this?"

Clif-mon rippled the strings along his second finger, which meant yes and no, but closer to no. "I think we're somewhere new, somewhere in-between."

Sixteen. Jerea clutched the cabinet door, stared at the number. The number hadn't changed in eleven months. Where were the rest? Burned in a fire? Stuffed in the backs of closets?

She went into the living room, looked at the totems perched everywhere, surrounding her. They all looked so peaceful, so hopeful. So trusting.

She pictured Clif-mon carving as she played, his blade dancing over the wood. His long fingers brushing sawdust. She walked from room to room, looking into wooden faces. Clif-mon was all around her – she could feel him. But at the same time she wondered if this was as close as she would ever get to him.

Her face was wet by the time she finished. She lifted one from the coffee table – an astronomer peering at the heavens through an Everling telescope – and kissed its carved cheek.

"I'm trying," she whispered. She set it back down. She went

to bed and cried, mourning her husband on the six year anniversary of the day she had plunged a knife into his chest.

"You know, I read an article on the parallels between Everling philosophy and quantum physics," Bryant said as he dragged a slice of pizza out of the box and across the expanse of Jerea's kitchen table to his plate, leaving an oily trail. "It's interesting how closely they match."

Here we go, Jerea thought. She didn't have the energy to listen to an esoteric Bryant lecture at the moment. She didn't answer, just stared at her plate, chewed, focused on getting some of the pizza down. Every swallow was an effort.

How could she possibly find every single totem? She was beginning to suspect it was impossible.

"Take Heisenberg, for example. He said that we can't ever know the nature of subatomic reality, because it changes when we try to measure it. We are part of it, it's like trying to bite your teeth."

Bryant didn't notice that Jerea wasn't interested. She needed to tell him to go home. As nicely as possible.

"... took an electron, separated it from the nucleus, and moved it halfway across the world, then changed its rotation. The other electrons circling that nucleus *instantly* adjusted their rotations to accommodate the change to the electron that was *halfway across the world!*"

She glanced at a group of totems that Bryant had pulled out to admire. They were lined up along the carpet like oversized chess pieces looking for a game. Did they look more bunched together than before? Hard to say. Maybe.

"... Sir James Jeans. He said 'the closer you look, the less the universe looks like a machine, and the more it looks like one giant thought'. Or something like that."

"Mm-hmm," Jerea said absently. Sixteen more. It had been crazy to think that she could find every one. She got up from the table, sat on the carpet, looked into the face of a climber reaching for an invisible handhold on an invisible mountain.

Bryant spoke louder so she could hear him. "They're part of a whole, just as the Everlings say. Even if you separate the pieces by a great distance, they still act like one whole."

She froze, her finger pinching the top of a totem's head, as if contemplating a move. "Wait a minute."

Bryant didn't hear her. He went on talking.

Jerea's heart started to thud. She pictured those electrons, shifting their rotation, answering the call of their brother half a world away. No, not their brother. Their missing limb.

"*Wait a minute!*" Jerea cried.

"What?" Bryant asked, jolted out of his monologue.

"Help me! Help me try something!" She pulled two totems off the carpet, rushed them to one corner of the room, pressed them up against the totems already there, ran back and grabbed two more.

"What are you doing?" Bryant asked, standing with his palms pressed to his kidneys.

"Move *every* totem together, into a bunch." She started on the shelves. "Start in the study." She could see he wanted an explanation, but obediently he headed for the study, appeared a moment later with a totem in each hand.

Soon one side of the living room was packed elbow-to-elbow with totems. Jerea and Bryant passed each other repeatedly as they retrieved the last of them from the vestibule.

"There!" Bryant said as he set the final totem alongside the others. "Now will you tell me why we just did that?"

Jerea folded her hands together as if she were praying. "If I'm right, you'll understand in a minute." She lifted one totem

from the group – it was the one the Indian merchant with the pockmarked face had called the tree god – and took it to the far side of the room. She set it down on the hardwood floor, lay on her stomach with her face a foot from it, and stared.

Bryant squatted on one knee beside her.

It moved. As slowly as the minute hand on a clock, but it moved visibly. Jerea heard a soft scraping sound.

"Oh God," she said, her voice hitching with emotion.

"It's like a gravitational field!" Bryant said, staring at the totem creeping inexorably across the floor. It had already moved a good half-inch.

"The pieces are drawn to each other. They crave wholeness." She looked at Bryant. "Do you realize what this means?"

He cleared his throat, sniffed. "Ah," he said. "We can find the missing ones!"

Jerea leapt up, screeching, and hugged Bryant. She jumped up and down like a kid; Bryant held her tight and bobbed a little, pressing his face against her neck.

"Hold on . . . I want to try something," Jerea said. She went into the kitchen and retrieved a baking sheet and a bottle of olive oil. She poured a circle of oil into the pan, rubbed it around with her fingertip, put the lone totem into the pan.

It glided across the pan at the clip of a medium-sized turtle. Jerea clapped with delight.

They drove south for six hours, finally stopping in Shahi. It didn't matter where they went, because they didn't know where the other totems were, just as long as they were far enough from the bulk of the totems for the pull of the closest lost ones to register.

Jerea pulled into a parking space on a narrow side street, outside a Hindu temple. Tall, weathered figures of Vishnu and Shiva flanked the entrance. Monkeys screeched from the slanted roof, leapt into the palm trees overhead. Nearby a pregnant girl drinking an orange soda stood under the eave of a plywood snack stall, chatting with a round-faced woman sitting behind the counter.

Jerea unpacked the baking sheet and oiled it on the hood of the car, while Bryant sat in the passenger's seat with a road map in his lap, fiddling with a laser protractor.

"We should do this on level ground," she said as Bryant slammed the door, his free hand filled with gadgets. Jerea found a level spot on the sandy ground, flicked a paper cup and a lollipop stick out of the way and set the baking sheet down. The pregnant girl and stallkeeper watched with interest.

Bryant consulted a GPS compass, rotated the baking sheet a quarter-turn. "Now it's facing Calcutta, and all your totems." Jerea set the test-totem (the artist, for luck) at the far end of the greased baking sheet and started a stopwatch. They watched in silence. The totem didn't seem to be moving, but after a moment Jerea saw a streak in the grease directly behind it. It was no longer than the width of a blade of grass, but it was a beautiful sight. A monkey howled fiercely overhead, as if in celebration. The woman in the stall said something in Bengali. The pregnant girl laughed, covering her mouth.

Forty minutes later the totem bumped into the far side of the tray, close to the left corner. "Paydirt!" Bryant said. Jerea smiled. She'd never heard anyone use that phrase out loud. Bryant marked the lip of the tray with a grease pencil, measured the distance from the mark to the point of origin, then the distance from the mark to the center of the tray's end. He recorded the measurements in his computer.

"We'll be flying blind at first, but we'll get more precise as

we gather more data." He looked up at Jerea. "Let's head south-southeast, to Malabad, then take another reading."

Jerea spotted an opening in the crush of Calcutta traffic, hurled the Mini into the breach. Quickly the space clogged with others who'd seen the same opening. The left tires double-thudded over something substantial. Jerea hoped it was a dead dog rather than a person. The traffic was packed too tightly to see. She eased past a packed bus. Men clung to iron handholds, others lay on the roof. One scrawny man whistled, made a kissing gesture at her.

"These men are such swine," Bryant said.

Jerea nodded absently. Glancing in the rearview, she admired her two recent acquisitions and smiled. Bryant followed her gaze.

"Hard to believe the hunt is almost over," he said wistfully. "Three more. Hard to believe." He looked out his window, tasked at something happening on the sidewalk. He was wearing the jeans Jerea had bought him.

"We'll still be friends, right? We can still get together." There was a pleading tone in his voice.

"Of course," she said, suspecting that she was lying.

"Maybe we can start collecting something else together once we've found the last three totems."

"We'll see," Jerea said. She turned onto her narrow street, sped over potholes. At the wall of her apartment complex the gateman swung the corrugated metal gate open and she pulled in.

Turning off the ignition, she turned to look at Bryant. "When we get down to the last one, I want to do it on my own."

Bryant frowned. "But we're a team. I was planning a big celebration after we found the last one."

Jerea nodded. A dog barked nearby. "We will celebrate, with Clif-mon. But the end of this is very personal to me, and I want to do it alone." The car was getting hot. "Okay?"

Bryant looked crestfallen. He nodded, opened his door.

Then something so obvious occurred to her – she couldn't believe she hadn't thought of it before.

"Bryant! Hold on!"

"Yes?"

"Once I've resurrected Clif-Mon, I want you to have all of the totems. It's my gift to you for everything you've done."

"Oh," Bryant said. "That's very kind of you. Thank you." He nodded, then got out of the car. Jerea had expected him to be more excited. He loved the totems.

Inside she found places for her newest additions while Bryant packed in the guest room. He came out wheeling his suitcase.

"So Friday we meet in Morocco?" he said. He sounded a little better. Based on the nearly imperceptible pull the last few were exerting, they were far away. They were guessing at least one was in North Africa, possibly another in the Middle East.

"Yup. I'm going to book my flight right after I drop you off."

The water dancer was missing. It belonged on the shelf to the left of the window, between the painter and the kneeling woman, but it wasn't there. Jerea inspected the shelf closely. Rather than a blank space where it should be, the rest of the figures were evenly spaced, as if the water dancer had never been there. But it had.

She did a slow circuit of the room, then of the rest of the house, knowing she had not moved it, growing more anxious by the moment. Where the hell was the water dancer?

Fighting panic, she did a count. Three twenty-nine. Four

missing, not three. It should have been three.

She called Bryant, frantically told him about the water dancer. He tried to calm her down.

"You must have misplaced it," he said evenly. "Maybe it drifted, fell off the shelf? Did you look under the bed?"

"It's not under the bed!" Jerea almost shouted.

"Well, we'll figure it out. Are we still on for Morocco?"

Morocco? He made it sound as if they were going on a vacation, like the totems were just an excuse to travel . . .

And suddenly she knew where to find the water dancer. She uttered a few numb-lipped words to get Bryant off the phone, then made reservations to Bombay on the next speed-rail.

Bryant didn't look happy to see her when he opened the door. That was a first. "What are you doing here?" he sputtered. Jerea pressed open the door and walked past him. "Wait!" he said, tugging on the back of her wrinkled shirt.

She scanned the field of debris in his living room, then the study, ignoring Bryant's rapid yammering.

She found it in his bedroom, lying on the carpet, split in half. She squatted, picked up the halves.

The reservoir was empty.

"What did you do?" she asked.

"Nothing." He sniffed violently.

She wheeled, clutching the totem halves. She held them up. "What did you do?" she screamed.

"We have to hunt for it," he said. Jerea gasped, and Bryant said something else. It was nearly inaudible, but may have been "I love you."

Jerea stormed past him, to the kitchen. She lay the totem on the counter, yanked open drawers until she found the knives, pulled a thick black-handled blade from the drawer.

Bryant was still in the bedroom. She pointed the knife at his throat. He took a step back, made a nasal clucking sound. "What. Did you do. With it?" she said, closing the distance between them, pressing the trembling knife close to his bobbing Adam's apple.

"Put it down and I'll tell you," Bryant whined.

"I'll cut your heart out!" she screamed.

"You already have!" He took another step back, stumbled and fell onto the bed. "I threw it in the ocean!" he cried. "All right? I threw it in the ocean."

The knife fell from Jerea's hand. She pressed her palms against the sides of her head and stared at Bryant. She opened her mouth. She looked down at the knife. Bryant followed her gaze.

"Are you lying to me?" she said.

"No."


"Why?"

Bryant stared at her shoes. He opened his mouth, inhaled, closed his mouth. "Because I didn't want to lose you," he said, finally.

Jerea retrieved the totem halves from the kitchen. Cradling them to her chest with one arm, she pulled open the front door. Bryant said something as she left, but Jerea didn't hear what it was.

She sat on a colorful round rug on her living room floor, completely surrounded by totems. Three hundred and thirty-three totems. All of them, including the three from Morocco. Every one. Except one was split and empty.

That reminded her. She stood, stepped carefully through the totems, went to the kitchen, opened the cabinet door. The tally sheet was filled with crossed out numbers. At the bottom



right was the only uncrossed number: 1. She drew a line through the number, closed the cabinet door.

Settling back into her spot, she grabbed the closest totem and carefully split it with a laser chisel. A goldenrod gumdrop sat nestled in the center. She pried it out with one finger and held it in her palm.

"Hello," she whispered. It rolled in her palm like a caress. She set it in a glass bowl. A teardrop plunked into the bowl. She reached for another totem.

It was the middle of the night when she finished. She drove to the ocean then, the glass bowl in the passenger's seat holding all but one drop of Clif-mon's brilliant goldenrod essence. Her cello was in the back.

The sand was cool between her toes, the sky so black she couldn't see the crashing waves until she was at the water's edge.

She waded out waist-deep into the warm water, cradling Clif-mon's incomplete essence. Gently she lowered it into the churning black water until the pull of the tide tugged it from her.

"Now you're complete," she whispered. "Now you're whole."

She sat on the beach and played Passanante's Triptych. She played it as it was written. Then she waded into the water with her cello, holding it high, away from the breaking waves. With each step she flinched, expecting Clif-mon's essence to be underfoot, a golden jellyfish.

She lay the cello on the water. It floated quickly out to sea, as if pulled by some invisible force, or perhaps seeking the rest of its essence.

A brown cow clopped past Jerea on the narrow market street like an idle shopper. It stopped, flapped its ears, nosed a mound of trash, moved on. Its lazy, dragging gait reminded her of the women in colorful saris, who walked with a practiced limp meant to convey a life of leisure and privilege.

Why was she still here? It was time to go home, if not to continue her career, then at least to heal. She would never heal in Calcutta.

She passed a freshly-painted red and blue sign among the cacophony of crooked and faded store signs. "Police district 558. Beware of touts, hoodlumps and brokers." Had she visited

that police station in her first frantic days in Calcutta? She couldn't remember.

Her cell phone rang. She fished it from her pocket, flipped open the screen.

Clif-mon's long face stared at her.

Jerea felt a fresh stab of grief at the sight of his face. But she wasn't fooled, she knew he was dead, that this image of him must be a . . . a what? A stray photo file, a different Everling, a news station errantly crossing her phone line.

"I don't recall the part of our plan that involved dumping me in the ocean," Clif-mon said, not unpleasantly. "Something went wrong?" The ocean surf roared behind him.

Jerea held the phone closer, opened her eyes wide, stared into Clif-mon's questioning eyes. "Tell me this is really you," Jerea pleaded.

"It's me. What happened? Why did I reincorporate in thirty feet of water? I nearly drowned."

"How can you be alive?"

"Then something did go wrong." He tilted his head, looked

at her carefully. "You look older. How long have I been dead?"

"Tell me where you are." Jerea flagged an auto rickshaw. She heard Clif-mon talking to a man, probably the same man who leant him the phone.

Over the whine of the auto rickshaw Clif-mon told Jerea he was on a beach in Varanas, surrounded by a fast-growing group of very curious locals. He promised to wait there for Jerea, who was crying so hard she could barely speak.

As she stared over the hunched head of her driver at the packed streets, willing the rickshaw to fly, faster, so she could get to her car and speed to Varanas, she tried to imagine that little drop of essence rolling along the ocean floor, not mistaken for food, not snagged in a coral reef. Moving through the crushing pressure, the swirling tides, the darkness and cold, seeking to be whole.

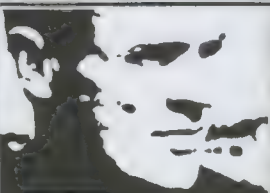
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Lord of the Rings: that it's the nation's favourite read is neither here nor there

MIKE O'DRISCOLL



NIGHT'S PLUTONIAN SHORE

COMMENT :: IT'S FANTASY, STUPID



Attempts to label contemporary fiction of the fantastic, to clarify what it is and to distinguish between it and other types of fantasy, have generated much debate within the genre over the last couple of years, particularly over in *The 3rd Alternative's* editorial pages and on the TTA Press message boards. Maybe it started with Andrew Hedgecock's guest editorial in TTA32 in which he defended British writers against a charge of insularity, citing Michael Moorcock, M. John Harrison and Graham Joyce among others, as writers whose works are as challenging and visionary as anything by those pesky Yanks. More likely it was Harrison himself in TTA33 who really got the debate going with his rejection of the Tolkien template of fantasy. "Let's be

something new," Harrison proclaimed, and it's this search for something new, this attempt to escape fantasy and create an alternative to the Tolkien tradition, that has provoked an awful lot of lively and intelligent comment, which though entertaining, is ultimately self-defeating.

Whether it's admitted or not, underpinning this debate is the question of fantasy's relation to 'literary' or 'non-genre' fiction. For the sake of argument, I'm using the term 'fantasy' in its broader sense, to embrace not only what might be called 'generic fantasy' – ie what used to be called 'High' or 'Epic' fantasy, or 'sword & sorcery' – but also supernatural and horror fiction, slipstream, fabulation and, because it stems ultimately from the same tradition, sf. It's debatable whether, even if the term had been coined, H.G.

Wells would have considered himself a sf writer, any more than either Moorcock or Harrison do now. In the late 19th century, distinctions between popular and literary fiction were still fluid, and even into the early 20th fantasists like Machen, Blackwood, Hodgson, M.R. James and Lord Dunsany were read by a much broader cross-section of the reading public than their modern day contemporaries. Most were published by mainstream publishing houses, and the idea of their works being targeted to a specific group of readers who consumed only one particular type of fiction would have seemed alien. Yet, as genre theorists like Clive Bloom have shown, changes in publishing technology and market forces contributed to the development of genres, which, over time have

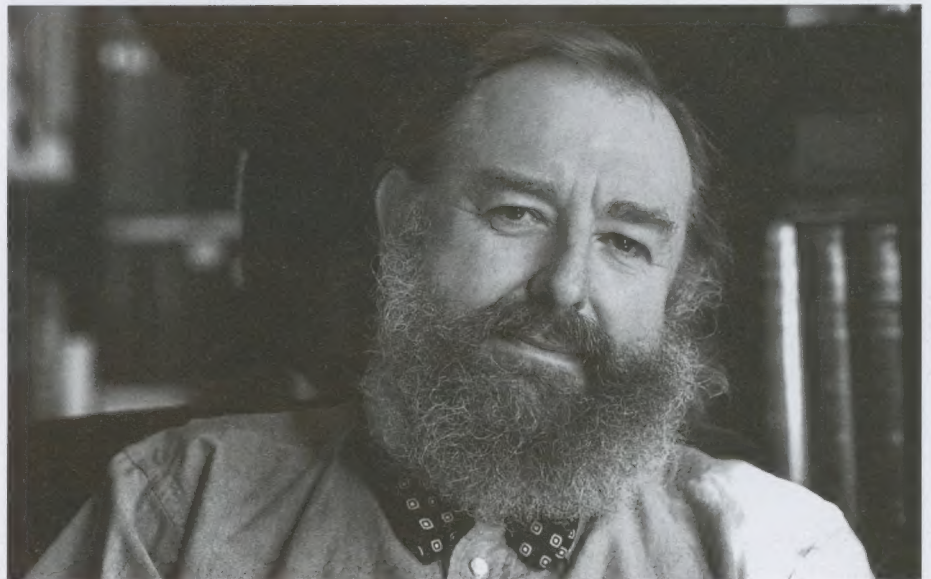
fragmented and evolved, to the extent that for the last fifty or so years, the various strands of the fantastic have been more preoccupied with distancing themselves from each other than with examining how fantasy as a whole relates to non-genre fiction. We spend so much time distinguishing between 'dark fantasy' and 'slipstream', between 'supernatural horror' and 'science fantasy', that it seems we have little idea of how 'readers' outside the genre – as opposed to broadsheet critics and reviewers – perceive us. While Harrison's 'New Weird' – posited as a politically constructed, secular literature of radical possibilities – attempts to distance the works of contemporary fantasists like China Miéville, Justina Robson, and Harrison himself, from the kind of formulaic fantasy personified by John Norman, Alan Dean Foster or Terry Brooks, to those outside the genre ghetto, the distinction is meaningless or simply irrelevant.

A few months back, a UK broadsheet ran a story about an all-male reading group, no doubt considering this a sufficiently rare phenomenon as to warrant a report. Apart from wondering whether all-female reading groups are the norm, I was fascinated by the article's subtext, which appeared to be that men do read stuff other than news, sport, lifestyle magazines and the oeuvre of Andy McNab. They can and do read 'serious literature' which, in this case, seemed to comprise Irvine Welsh, Nick Hornby and Tony Parsons, along with the odd sprinkling of Amis, Barnes and Frantzen. Asked what other type of books they read, one of the group responded that they read almost anything, "except fantasy, of course." Well, obviously "of course." After all, if mainstream literary culture has spent decades turning up its nose at the smell coming off the genre ghetto, then why should a 'reading group' break ranks? Strangely, one or two members of the group admitted to reading sf – Olaf Stapledon and Arthur C. Clarke were mentioned – but the irony of this seems to have escaped them, or maybe it's just that sf is more socially acceptable than fantasy. Except "of course," that great swathes of the reading public do read fantasy, as evidenced not only by the sales for writers like Rowling, Pullman, King and Pratchett, but by the presence of these and other fantasists including Lewis Carroll, A.A. Milne and Kenneth Grahame in the BBC's 'Big Read'

poll of 2003. The fact that *Lord of the Rings* topped the poll as the nation's favourite read is neither here nor there – something had to and just as well Tolkien as Jeffrey Archer. It may be that many readers of Pullman, Rowling and Carroll don't think of these works as fantasy, or of themselves as particularly devoted to the genre. Perhaps for vast numbers of readers, maybe even the majority, the question of genre is irrelevant. What matters is the particular, the individual work, and how they respond to it. If a book provokes some profound re-adjustment in the way a reader perceives reality or relates to the world, it's the book itself they remember, rather than the category to which the market determines it belongs. The same reader might have a similar emotional and

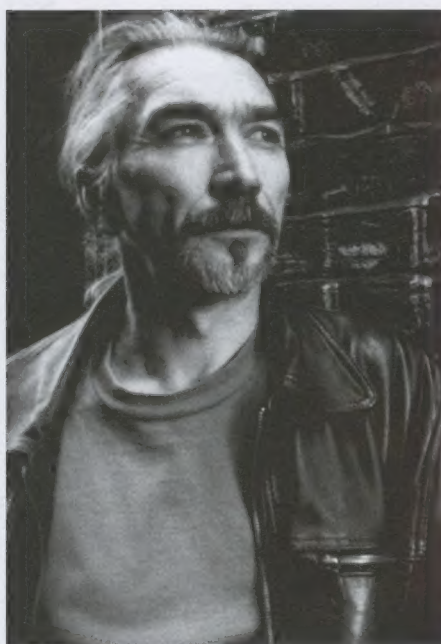
intellectual response to John Crowley's *Little, Big*, Thomas Pynchon's *V*, or Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* without paying much attention to whether one or more of them are works of fantasy.

Take Philip Roth's most recent novel, *The Plot Against America*. The narrative hinges on the question of American foreign and domestic policy – particularly towards its Jewish minority – in the early 1940s, had aviator and vehement anti-semitic Charles Lindbergh been nominated for and won the 1940 presidential election. Although the history depicted in the novel diverges from our reality only for a little over two years – after Lindbergh's disappearance, the Japanese bomb Pearl Harbour and America enters the war a year late – its central conceit, the posing of the



Andrew Hedgecock defended British writers against a charge of insularity, citing Michael Moorcock (above), M. John Harrison and Graham Joyce as writers whose works are as challenging and visionary as anything by those pesky Yanks

Who knows, maybe they've read Kafka, Angela Carter, Garcia Marquez, Flann O'Brien, Don De Lillo or Jonathan Lethem (right) without for one second thinking that they were reading fantasy



"Let's be something new," M. John Harrison (left) proclaimed, and it's this search for something new, this attempt to escape fantasy and create an alternative to the Tolkien tradition, that has provoked an awful lot of lively and intelligent comment

'what if' question, will be familiar to most sf readers as an example of the alternative history sub-genre. From Ward Moore's *Bring the Jubilee* to Keith Roberts' *Pavane*, the question of how our reality might have turned out given a different outcome to some historical event, has long been a sf staple. But that doesn't make Roth's novel sf, any more than it did Len Deighton's *SS-GB* or Robert Harris' *Fatherland*. These two were marketed and perceived as thrillers because neither writer had a background in generic sf, unlike Philip Dick, whose superior *The Man in the High Castle* poses the same 'what if Hitler had won WWII' question, but which has probably not been as widely read outside the genre community



despite its status as a sf classic. Dick saw himself as working within a sf tradition, but I doubt whether Roth was conscious of any such thing. I don't mean to privilege one above the other, but the truth is that despite sharing a central conceit, the two books have been perceived in different ways. Out of half a dozen reviews I've seen of *The Plot Against America*, only one has made passing reference to its having something in common with a strand of sf. Every essay I've read on Dick's novel has discussed it primarily as a work of sf. Roth's book would probably be discussed in the same terms if it was reviewed by a writer within the sf field. The point is that however it might be read within the genre, it would not occur to those outside the field to consider it as a work of sf.

To get back to our all male reading group, the chances are that they have read and enjoyed works of fantasy without considering that such works are perceived by many readers as works of the fantastic. Maybe they've read *His Dark Materials* and consider it as a superior and morally challenging work aimed at young adults? Perhaps they see *The Wind in the Willows* as an imaginative reconstruction of an Arcadian England that never was, and maybe the *Alice* books are acceptable for the way in which they render the illogic of dreams so vividly real? Who knows, maybe they've read Kafka, Angela Carter, Garcia Marquez, Flann O'Brien, Don De Lillo or Jonathan Lethem without for one second thinking that they were reading fantasy because "of course," these are magic realists or fabulists or postmodernists, certainly not writers of fantasy. And if they've read King, Straub, Barker or Neil Gaiman, then that's okay because these guys are horror writers, right? And horror has nothing to do with fantasy because fantasy is all about elves and orcs and fairies and dragons and simplistic notions of good and evil.

Their perception of fantasy, in short, resembles that which Harrison seems to be kicking against in his call for writers of the fantastic to be something new. While the ensuing debates might engage us mightily, I suspect the vast majority of those outside the genre are completely unaware of the tangle we've gotten into in trying to define what it is we do. Whatever name or label we finally decide upon – at least until it too is deemed old hat – the mainstream will still think of it as fantasy. Rather than trying to escape the genre, to deny that which distinguishes us from literary realism – subverting the constraints of the rational, rendering the impossible through words, realising the potential of the fantastic to show us new ways of perceiving the world – we should be celebrating it. By denying that we write fantasy, by proclaiming ourselves something else, we confirm the mainstream's perception of a moribund, formulaic genre. If, on the other hand, we suggest that readers of Umberto Eco might enjoy Mark Danielweski's *House of Leaves*, or that Lucius Shepard has as much to say about myth and masculinity as Garcia Marquez, or that writers like Carroll, Elizabeth Hand and Glen Hirshberg are exposing fantasy's rich potential without worrying about how its labelled, then we might after all get people to see that there's more to us than elves and orcs. ☒

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